

Obra/Artifact



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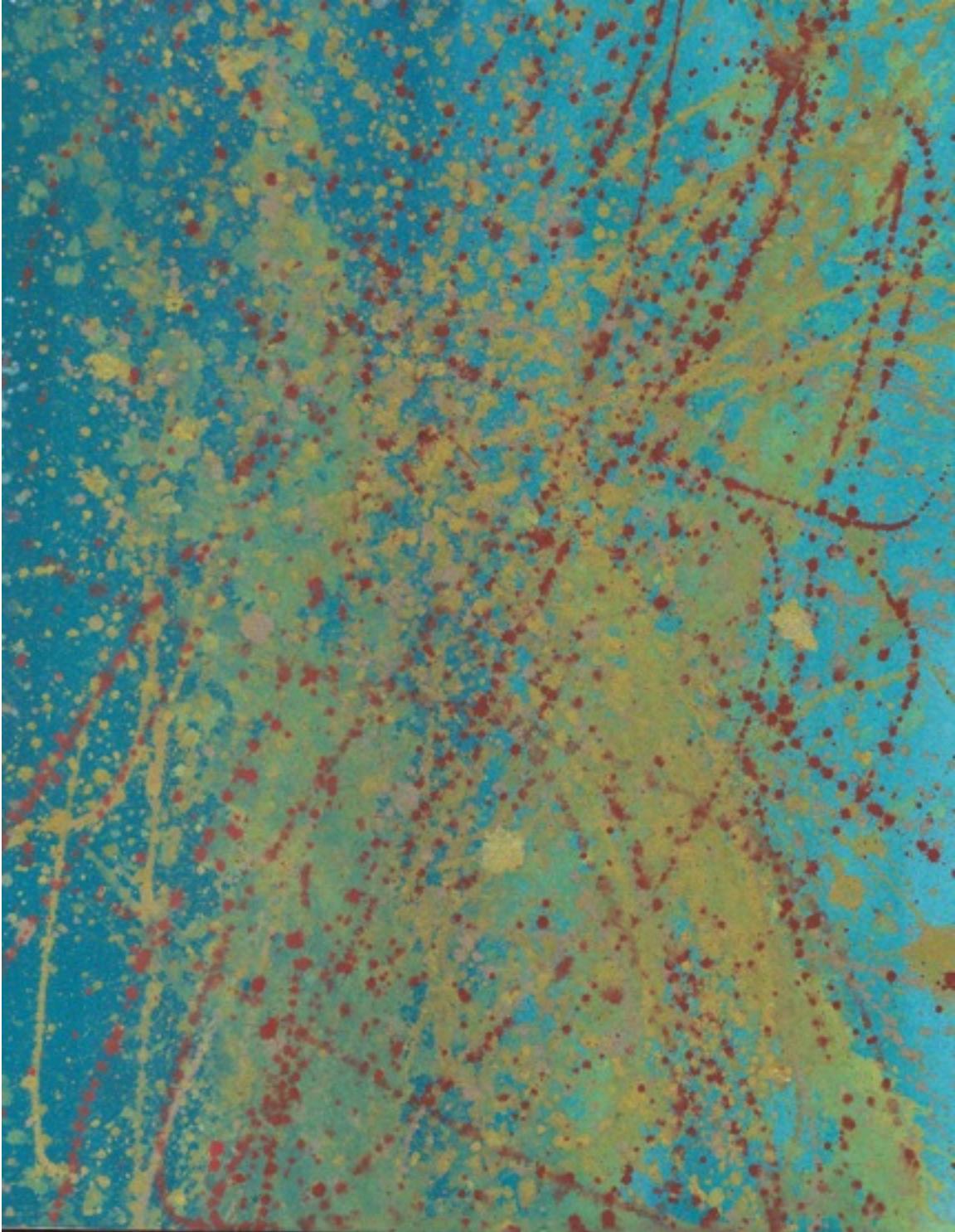
from the editors

Within Obra/Artifact has always been a vast space for art and language, text and image, multilingual and translated works. Through creating this issue together, we have again learned so much. We are also learning languages of access, expression, and perspective. Each contributor should be considered a feature. We are thankful for the community of writers and artists who are doing the work and offering it to editors and journals. Thankful, too, for the many hands that bring this body of work to its life on page and screen.

Because we were here together — onward.

—The Editors

cover graphique: IMG_7966 | Jim Zola



graphique: Action Painting in Blue Gold Red | John Timothy Robinson

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prose contest finalists

12 Steps | Morgan Christie

1. Powerless

Explain that it's bigger than you. That she can't possibly understand because she is young and inexperienced. Watch her roll her eyes because she is not so young anymore, because she is experienced, because you made her grow up too fast. Act like you don't see her roll her eyes, pretend you don't know why she rolled them. Tell her that her behavior is unbecoming. Tense up when she yells the same thing at you. Get up in a fury because she raised her voice, ask her who the hell she thinks she is. Feel your heart skip a beat when she says, "my father's daughter" and rolls her eyes again. Bite your lip before you say the thing you immediately wish you didn't say. Feel the words creeping up your throat and tickling your tongue. Mumble under your breath, "and you wonder why I drink..." See her staring at you, fully aware that she heard her father blame his daughter for a problem he had since before she was born. Watch her stand up and wonder when she got so tall, notice that she has put on weight, as well. Watch her grab your Heineken and launch it at the fridge before you can react. Wince at the sound of the bottle shattering into what sounds like a thousand pieces, look down at those pieces before you look back at her. Realize what a good arm she has. Think about reaching across the table, not to hurt her, just to scare her. Don't. Stand there motionless as she storms off and you hear the front door slam behind her. Worry that she might not come home this time as you tiptoe over the broken glass and grab another beer from the fridge. Open the bottle and sit back down to finish your meal. Pause a second and try to remember how the argument started as you sip your Heineken.

2. Greater Than

Stay up downing a mixture of rum and whiskey until 3:04am; convince yourself you are doing it because she has not come home. Pretend that this is not your nightly routine. Leave another message for her, "Jemma, you better not be at that little dick's place. Come home, now!" Hear how sober you sound before hanging up as you shut your eyes so the spinning stops. Think about that article she brought you three years ago, the one about functioning alcoholics. Remember glancing at her under eyed and tossing it on the coffee table before gnarling, "where does an eighth grader find shit like this." Remember her response, "I'm in grade nine." Remember waiting until she went into the kitchen to pick up the article, remember reading about susceptibility levels increasing with time, remember the same paragraph stressing the fact that that doesn't mean you have it under control. Remember

reaching for the last bottle of your four pack, remember reading that there is always something more to live for than an addiction. Remember peaking in the kitchen and seeing her make a PB&J, watching her spread the peanut butter as methodically as she'd brush her teeth, iron her clothes, and count her babysitting money. Money you asked her to borrow the day after she worked, money you still need to give back to her. Remember smiling as she put the sandwich together and called out, "do you want a snack, dad?" and you saying, "no." Remember the weight of the bottle in your left hand against that of the article in the right, how much heavier it was. Remember hearing her coming back towards the den, remember tossing the article away before she came through. Remember staring at her hair and thinking about how much it looked like her mother's. Remember gulping a mouthful of Budweiser as the article brushed the bottom of your heal. Call Jemma, again.

3. Decide

Pass out then wake up an hour later. Stand up and stagger to her room, see that she still isn't home. Grab your car keys and get in the pickup. Back out of the driveway and clip the trash can, remember to put the trash out tomorrow. Take off faster than you should because you are angry, angry that she hasn't come home, but mostly, because you know where she is. Swerve a bit because your eyes are still adjusting, get angrier because you have to be at work in a few hours and instead of sleeping you're out swerving in the street to pick up your seventeen-year-old from her twenty-year-old boyfriend's house. Get even angrier because the thought of it all pisses you off so much. Get to his house nine minutes later and bang on the front door as loud as you can. Wait too long before he opens the door and says, "hey, Byron... Sup?" Answer him, "it's Mr. Sellers... Tell Jemma to get out here." Watch his left eyebrow raise and that roguish smirk creep across his face, "she's getting dressed." Feel yourself become tense and your right hand turn to a fist. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Want to punch him hard in the face but remind yourself that this kid could kick your ass, that he is five inches taller and eight inches broader; that you already have two strikes and a third would mean you go away and she would end up living here, with him. Open your eyes. See that Jemma is standing in front of you with her arms crossed. Motion to the car and start walking towards it, feel her grab the keys from your pocket. Think about demanding them back, but know she knows you well enough to tell when you've been drinking. Know she knows that's almost all the time. Get in the passenger seat before she pulls out real smooth, take notice of what a good driver she is. Remember that you didn't teach her, because she refused to let you. Say, "I could have him arrested, you know... You're seventeen!" Listen to her not respond. Feel the quiet between the two of you. Look at her and see the tear forming that she'll refuse to let fall. Listen to her whisper, "you have decide, dad..." Pretend to have no idea what's she's talking about.

4. Fearless

Remember knocking out in the truck as you wake up to the obnoxious beep of your alarm, wonder how you got there. Figure Jemma helped you inside after the hours of binging had finally caught up. Have the passing thought that she has tucked you in just as much as you have tucked her. Get up and be overcome by nausea, stand still for a moment as it passes. Go to the kitchen and get the coffee started. Get in a cold shower. Feel the heavy streams whip your face as the nausea comes back, lean forward and feel the water beating your bald spot. Feel it coming up. Wretch, loudly. Vomit smooth streams of yellow and watch it splash around your toes before going down the drain. Continue to vomit until your stomach is empty then get out of the shower. Start brushing your teeth and see the remnants of smooth yellow in the corners of your mouth as you watch yourself in the mirror. Stop brushing, wipe the yellow away, but keep staring. Think about what Jemma said in the truck, realize just how much it scared you. Remember when her mother told you to make the same decision, remember your choice. Remember thinking to yourself; trying and failing would mean you weren't strong enough. Question your strength as you examine the bags and crow's feet around your eyes, then think about how strong your daughter must be to drag her incapacitated father into bed. Look at yourself again and say under your breath, "I can do this."

5. Admit

Come home early on the fifth afternoon of your sobriety with two six packs and immediately regret throwing all of the rest of your liquor away. Remember why you did it; telling Jemma you were giving it up, remember her sarcastic, "okay". Remember asking her to help you get rid of it all five days ago, so she would take you seriously, remember the passing glance she threw you after the two of you wiped the house clean and dumped every stash out. Remember the way her eyes glittered and the almost smile she gave you, remember the warmth you felt. Remember trying to recall the last time she looked at you that way. Remember that look, it's the only thing that's gotten you through the past week. The shaky week, so much so that there were times you couldn't steady your hands enough to work the line. So much so that your co-workers noticed and asked you if you were feeling alright. The week of migraines and not being able to remember much of anything, the week of your heart beating so fast you thought it might explode. So much so that you thought about going to the doctor, but instead left work early and picked up two six packs on the way home. Take the six packs into your room and promise yourself you're just having one, just so you don't kill yourself trying to do this thing cold turkey. Finish a can in less than three minutes, lick your lips as the after taste of cool bitterness resonates on your tongue. Look at the six packs and start reaching for one more, try to stop yourself by remembering that look, grab one anyway.

Just one, more. Start drinking. Be startled when you hear her come in the house. Scurry around your room looking for a good hiding spot for the beers, settle on the top of your closet behind the winter sweaters. Hurry back to your bed and pretend to be napping when she knocks. Say, “come in.” Hear the door creak but keep your back to her as she asks, “what are you doing home so early?” Say, “wasn’t feeling well, thought I’d come rest a bit.” Listen to the quiet, be tempted to turn around to see what she’s doing. Don’t. Wonder if she can smell the beer on your breath even though you’re not facing her, wonder if she spotted the open closet door you didn’t have time to shut. Listen to her as she asks, “dad, have you been keeping clean?” Lie, “of course, I said I would, didn’t I?” Listen to her walk out without answering, but because you know her, know she nodded. Jump up and lock your door quietly, go back to the closet and get your booze, down every last can in an hour. Before knocking out, realize the real reason you didn’t look at her was because you were worried she’d have that look on her face, again. Worried that it might have been enough to keep you from finishing what was behind the sweaters.

6. Defects

Become meticulous at hiding your stashes. Keep them in the places she hates going, your bedroom, the garage, and her mother’s old work space, even though you converted it into a spare bedroom thirteen years ago, when she left. Hide whiskey bottles in your tool boxes, beer cans in your work boots, and rum in your dirty laundry. Only down them after she’s turned in, and don’t be bothered by only having warm ones to drink. Hide your bottles behind you one night when you hear her get out of bed and walk towards the living room. Pretend to be engrossed in the game. Feel her flop down beside you and stiffen your back so the bottles don’t rattle. Say, “what are you doing up?” Listen to her respond, “I’m not tired...” Wait for her to go on, you can tell she has something else to say, “I’m really proud of you. It’ll be two weeks, tomorrow.” Don’t answer, just nod and keep your eyes on the television. She goes on to tell you to make sure to be home by six o’clock tomorrow, she’s decided to make dinner to celebrate your accomplishment. Feel yourself tense as she takes hold of your chin, turns your face towards hers then says, “I love you, dad.” Smile at her before saying, “I love you, too.” Feel her arms wrap around your neck and let the tension melt away, stuff your face deep into the crevasse between her shoulder and neck and wrap your arms around her back. Hold her tightly, the way you did the night you had to tell her that her mother wasn’t coming back; the night you drank yourself into the stupor you stayed in for a week. Feel her arms loosening from around your neck and let her go. Look at her. Notice that her face looks rounder than usual, realize you’re probably only noticing this because the two of you haven’t been this close in a long time. Feel strange moisture on the nape of your back. Nearly jump up but then remember the half empty bottle you were hiding and figure it tipped over when

you hugged her. Lean back, quickly. Say, “Alright, you have until the end of the quarter.” Put your arm around her and feel her snuggle up, remember how this feels. Send her to bed in five minutes, then dispose of the empty bottles behind you. Get an old rag and scrub the couch clean. Go to your room to change your beer stained clothing before going to bed.

7. Humility

Get off work and head straight home, no, stop at the bakery at the corner first. If she is making dinner, the least you could do is get dessert. Ask the lady behind the counter if they have any Boston cream pie, Jemma’s favorite, listen to the lady say, “no, but we will in the morning.” Blow, loudly. Buy an assortment of fruit tarts instead, her second favorite, and get home five minute before six. Be surprised by how good the house smells, beef stroganoff, wonder when she learned to cook such a thing. Realize this is the first time you’ve smelt the dish in over a decade, realize you haven’t eaten it since her mother left. Take the fruit tarts into the kitchen and tell her everything smells great. Notice that she doesn’t make eye contact with you when she responds, “thanks.” Wash your hands then sit down at the already set table. Lick your lips as she portions the stroganoff into both of your plates. Pick up your fork, stop, she’s staring at you. Say, “what?” Watch her face soften before responding, “this is a real milestone, you know. Two weeks!” Nod and glance down at your plate before she goes on, “I didn’t think you’d be able to do it without help, but here we are.” Nod again, but this time say, “I told you...” Watch her nod before she says, “you did. Oh, I forgot the drinks.” Take in a big mouthful of stroganoff, salivate a little, be consumed by the decadent flavor and rich aromas. Listen to Jemma open the fridge and say, “what’ll it be, dad?” Shoot your eyes in her direction and watch her pull your hidden liquor out of the fridge: your tool box whiskey, dirty linen rum, and work boot beer cans. Watch her turn around, cross her arms, and stare at you with your mouth full of stroganoff. Almost choke when she raises her voice, “WELL?” Chew profusely as she brings you a beer and pops the can open, swallow. Say, “I can explain,” listen to her say, “you don’t have to.” Be stumped. Don’t say a word. Watch her eat the meal she prepared for the two of you to celebrate your sobriety, still don’t say anything. Take another bite of stroganoff then sip the beer she opened for you.

8. The List

Wake up the following morning and see that a lot of her stuff is gone: toothbrush, bathrobe, jacket, shoes, backpack, and small suitcase, be relieved she didn’t take the big one. Go into the kitchen to call her with your apology, see a note on the kitchen table. Read it: *Dad, I understand that this is a process, but I think that in order for you to do this, something needs to be a stake... I’m staying with Mike until you A) Dispose of ALL the alcohol hidden in the house, B) Readmit yourself into AA, C) MAKE YOUR SOBRIETY THE PRIORITY - not*

me, not work, SOBRIETY D) Get and stay clean for at least two weeks. Once you do everything on this list, we'll talk. I'm not competing anymore, dad, I shouldn't have to... you shouldn't want me to. ~Jem. Feel your eyes welting up, don't cry. Be tempted to call Jemma, don't. Realize that she had every right to do what she did, except for giving you another chance, you don't deserve one. Go to the cabinet and grab a glass, then to the fridge and grab your rum. Sit down and pour yourself some. Stare at the burnt brown idling in front of you, don't cry. Push the glass off the table, and feel the rum splatter on your cheek. Bury your face in your palms and sink down into the chair. This time, cry. Cry loud and hard sobs as the tears in your hand form a shallow pool on your fingers. Feel your throat closing up as you gasp for air, realize you are hyperventilating. Push away from the table and put your head between your knees, panic, realize this has never happened before. Take long deep breaths, you heard this somewhere, realize it's not working. Stand up and grab your chest, it is starting to pinch. Find a brown bag to breath into, you heard this somewhere, as well. Take five slow breaths into the bag. Feel your breathing even out. Realize you had an anxiety attack as you lean against the counter. Realize you are alone and had it been something more, it would have been days before someone found you. Cover your mouth and close your eyes, think about that look, think about feeling her in your arms. Open your eyes. Take out your cell phone to call the AA group you were assigned to after the first two D.U.Is, realize you deleted the number. Hurry to your room and start digging through your night stand. Dig and dig and dig and dig until you find the card of the group's organizer. Dial and wait for her to pick up. Explain that you want to rejoin, listen to her not respond. Wait. Listen as she finally asks you, "Mr. Sellers, not to seem discouraging, but you've been in our program twice already, and once your probation was over, you quit. What makes this time any different?" Pause, think about that look again, say, "I think this is my last chance."

9. Amends

Mark '14' on the calendar. Clean out the house the following day. Look through spots you're sure you haven't hidden a stash, just in case. Be tempted to go on a final binge before throwing everything out, just taste a sip of the Russian whiskey a buddy gave you instead. Wonder if that buddy knows you drink - drank, figure everyone knew. Drink a quarter of the bottle, then throw it away. Brush your teeth, you need to get the smell of whiskey off your breath before AA. Go to the meeting. Sign in. Sigh in relief when you see it is not a circle set up, sit at the back of the room. Don't socialize, not even with the woman you recognize from your past experiences in the group. Pretend not to notice her staring at you with those clear brown eyes you can see sparkling from across the room, fiddle with your phone until the meeting starts, instead. Listen as the groups organizer says, "we have a few more people joining us, tonight. If it's your first time, or first time back in a while, come on up the front -

tell us why you are here.” Want to stay seated, but realize that would only draw more attention. Be the last person to get to the front and wait for the two men in front of you to speak. Ignore them as you try to figure out what to say. Think hard, so hard you realize you are making a face. Stop. Watch the man in front of you return to his seat. Keep your hands deep down in your pockets as you feel the room on your shoulders, every eye, every breath, everything. Say, “hi, I’m Byron,” Pause. Fidget a little before going on, “and I’m one of the ‘first time back in a while’ folks.” Listen to the room chuckle a bit, take a breath. Go on, “I’d like to say I’m here because I choose to be, and that’s sort of true, but mostly...” look out onto the room of people before finishing your thought, “I owe it to someone.”

10. Admit It

Mark ‘11’ on the calendar. Go to a walk-in clinic instead of work three days after the first AA meeting because the shakiness and other crap have come back. Find out they are not uncommon symptoms of withdrawal. Listen to the inpatient recommendation given by the doctor after you mention living alone, lie, “I’ll think about it.” Pocket your prescriptions, Chlordiazepoxide and Propranolol, listen to the doctor say, “they should be ready first thing tomorrow morning.” Shake the doctor’s hand and check the time. Decide to go see Jemma before heading to AA, you want to show her your prescriptions. See her sitting on the patio when you drive up. Smile and wave as you walk towards her, watch her glance away. Listen to her say, “we’re nowhere near two week, you know.” Shake your head in agreement, “I know, I just want to show you these,” dig the prescriptions out of your pocket and hand them to her, “they’re supposed to help me with the symptoms.” Look at her examine them, “you actually went to the doctor?” Grin and sit down beside her, “clinic.” Realize that was the first time you had seen a doctor in over a decade. Say, “I’m back in AA, too.” Watch her nod as she stares at your prescriptions. Sit in silence for a while then be surprised when she asks, “did mom regret having me?” Frown your face up before replying, “why would you ask that?” Listen to her response, “she left...” Say, “me!” Listen to her say, “us... Did she regret it?” Pause before saying, “I didn’t.” Watch her burst into a wail of laughter before saying, “says the alcoholic!” Don’t smile, just say, “says your dad...” Listen to her repeat, “the alcoholic!” Listen to her laughter die down and realize just how strange the question was, want to ask more about it, but understand she’ll only deflect again. She is her father’s daughter, remember. Stand up and say, “I should get going, AA starts soon.” Take the prescriptions back as she stands up. Want to hug her, don’t. Want to tell her that all of this is scaring the shit out of you, don’t; that you wish she was home, that you miss her, that you love her. Don’t. Just say, “guess I’ll see you later,” then turn around and walk to your truck. Hear her call out, “Dad!” Look back at her. Listen to her say, “eleven days.” Smile when you realize she is counting down, too. Nod. Get in the truck and go to AA. Be approached by the sparkly eyed

woman you remembered as you sign in. Hear her say, “remember me?” Lie, “sort of.” Watch her extend her hand, “I’m Sheila. Nice to meet you, Byron.” Tense up as you shake her hand and say, “hey, I’m Byron.” Remember that she just called you by name. Look away so she doesn’t see you flushed. Walk into the room together and listen to her say, “I’ve noticed that every time you come back you avoid mentioning the real reason you’re here. The reason we’re all here.” Look at her and say, “what do you mean?” Watch her shrug before sitting down beside her. Repeat yourself, “what are you talking about?” Listen to her shush you before the meeting starts. Think about what she said as a new woman introduces herself and goes on to say, “I’m an alcoholic and I’ve been fighting this thing way too long... I need help.” Feel Sheila’s head turn and glance down at her. Notice how attractive she is before realizing why she looked at you. Look away. Wait until after the meeting to say what you have to say to her, “I might not talk about it, Sheila, but my being here makes damn sure that it’s known.” Watch her eyes widen before you feel content enough in your zinger to leave, then feel her grab your arm. Watch her take out a pen and write a phone number on your palm. Feel her caress your arm before she leaves you sitting there. Contemplate. Call that number half an hour after you get home. Talk to Sheila about more than you expected to for the rest of the night.

11. Consciousness

Continue to count down the days and don’t take a single drink. Go out for coffee with Sheila twice and invite her out to dinner next week. Continue with AA and vomit more than a few times. Call Jemma every other day, tell her you can’t wait for her to come home. Take up an old hobby; reading. Go to a used bookstore and buy a bag of dollar novels, lie to the cashier when she comments on how many you have, say they are to pass the time. Think about the real reason being you need a distraction; something to keep your hands and mind busy. Read all the time; at home, on break, at lunch, before bed, all the time. Realize you’re also using reading as a way to withdraw because you sense yourself getting snippy. So much so that you told your manager to screw off a few days ago and the only reason he didn’t write you up being that you were a twenty year worker, that it was the first time he’d ever had a problem with you, that it was obvious you are going through something and that he wanted you to get through it. Remember shaking his hand and apologizing, “it won’t happen again.” Say, “no thanks,” to the guys at work when they invite you out for a beer. Go home and keep reading. Read as the days pass, Robertson and Poe and Austen and Mosley and James and Reid. Read and remember how much you enjoy it. Go to bed the night before you will pick up Jemma and think about how much she looks like your ex- wife. Wonder what she did with her life. Wonder how she can live that life knowing she abandoned her daughter. Stop thinking about it because it’s making you crave a shot. Pause. Realize what you just did and force yourself to

keep wondering. Wonder if she'll ever call Jemma, or if she already has and it's a secret they're keeping from you. Wonder if she had more children, if Jemma is a big a sister. Wonder what type of man she ended up with, or if she started dating women. Pause and cover yourself in the sheets. Wonder how terrible things must have been for her to leave you both, not just the man that drank, cheated, and slapped her; but the daughter that would undoubtedly remind her of that man every day. Wonder and then sleep. Wake up the next morning and write 'o' on the calendar. Get ready to go get Jemma but notice that her door is cracked. Peek inside her room and see that she is there, she is here, see that she came home on her own.

12. Pass On

Stay clean for another month. Keep going to AA and introduce Sheila to Jemma. Make dinner for the three of you, beef stroganoff, and listen to Jemma tell Sheila about her breakup with the little dick, "I mean, we started dating in high school and are in completely different places now..." Listen to Sheila's compassion and understanding even though you know she knows what actual hardship is. Feel something you haven't felt in a long time when Sheila kisses you goodnight. Want to ask her to stay over, don't, for Jemma's sake. Rejoin Jemma in the kitchen and notice that her weight is back down, that her face is no longer round. Think about asking her about it, don't. Think again, don't. Understand that she'll talk to you about it one day, if she chooses to. Catch yourself staring at her, keep staring when she looks at you. Listen to her ask, "what?" Say, "you make me really happy..." Laugh when she says, "happier then, Sheila?" Nod. Keep laughing when she says, "happier then Heineken?" Say, "happier then Heineken." Watch her smile, actually smile at you. Watch the corners of her mouth curve upward towards her full almond eyes and her cheeks lift into high dollops of what you imagine is pure serenity. Swear that this won't be the last time she smiles at you for what would feel like ages. Listen to her as she asks, "what was different this time, dad?" Say, "it isn't over, never will be, Jemma..." Listen to her say, "I know, but what was it?" Stare at her, hard. Explore the eyes you suddenly realize are a dead ringer for your own, just bigger, fuller. Look at them and realize she already knows the answer. Promise to never let her forget it.

The Locket | Aaron Emmel

After my grandmother died, while we helped my grandfather pack for his move to the assisted living facility, my sister came upon an ornate gold locket. It still gleamed, even though its floral styling marked it as belonging to another time. Inside was a yellowed picture of a middle-aged, regal-looking woman with a wistful expression in her pale eyes, a woman we had never seen before.

Our grandfather took the opened locket and looked at it for a long time, but he didn't answer any of our questions. Then one day, as we unboxed takeout at his new apartment, he suddenly began talking.

He had been a junior high schooler playing with his friends in the Alleghany foothills when one of his companions, a girl he'd always found pretty and, thus, mostly avoided, asked him to follow her away from the others. He'd agreed.

"She took me to this place where we could still just hear our friends but we couldn't see them," our grandfather said. The spring air was cool and the wind through the sugar maple and hickory trees sounded like water. Her eyes were clear like the morning sky, and when she stepped up next to him she smelled like lavender. Her fingers were cold and trembled when she slipped the locket into his hand. "I've been waiting for someone to give this to," she told me, 'and I want to give it to you.' The logical thing to ask would have been why—'Why me,' or 'Why do you have to give it to anyone at all'—but I didn't want to be logical. I wanted to keep feeling her hand and smelling her perfume. So I took it."

She looked relieved. But she told him there was one condition.

"There's always a condition," my grandfather explained. "I might have been young, but I already knew that."

He had to promise never to open it. He promised. "And then we went back to our friends, and they all looked at us like they knew something was up, and my heart just kept pounding and pounding. The whole rest of the day I was afraid to look at her. That night I closed the door in my bedroom and pulled the locket out of my pocket, and that's when I realized that even though I'd agreed to the condition, I didn't know what the condition was for. I didn't know what I'd just agreed to."

“So you opened the locket,” I prompted.

He looked at me as though doubting his decision to share this with us. “Of course not. I read things. I knew the story of the Fisher Lad. I knew that when a girl gave you a gift and told you to keep it closed, you kept it closed.”

“Did she explain why?” my sister asked.

“She wasn’t at school the next day. I asked around and it turned out she’d moved out of state. Her father had gotten a new job. The next time I saw her was in Baltimore, just after I started at Sparrow Point.”

“Where you met grandmother,” I said, pleased at the opportunity to demonstrate my grasp of family history.

My grandfather spoke as if he hadn’t heard me. “We were both in our early twenties. I saw her in the street and I felt exactly the same way I had back in the forest. My heart pounded just as loud. When I walked up to her she even had the same perfume on, the same smell of lavender. Five months later we got married and moved into a new rowhouse.”

“But I thought—” My sister frowned her confusion. I was glad I wasn’t the only one who had the chronology wrong. “Was this before grandma?”

“She made me promise again not to open the locket. I said of course. I hadn’t opened it during all those years I thought I’d never see her again, so why would I do it then, when we were finally together? Nothing else seemed out of the ordinary.

“Well, except that we never had kids. That’s something we just accepted. We never went to get it checked out. I wanted them. It was obvious she didn’t, even though she volunteered with an art program for kids with special needs. She was busy with her painting, and she said she already had everything she wanted.” He nodded to himself. “And maybe another thing. Sometimes, when she thought I wasn’t watching, I’d catch her staring off into space, like she was remembering something that made her sad. But as soon as she noticed me her whole face smiled and everything was okay. And then one day, when I was almost forty-five, after we’d been married about twenty-five years—”

“This is all made up?” My sister, who had been watching my grandfather with increasing confusion, abruptly sat back. Our Thai food had gone cold on its plates. “You married grandma in your twenties. I know that. Mom would have been a teenager by the time you were in your forties, and Aunt Marsha was two years older than she was.”

“I was forty-four,” my grandfather said firmly, “and I was sitting up in bed reading when she walked in with the locket in her hand, dangling by its chain. I had forgotten it by then. She pressed it back into my fingers, just like she had when we were kids. ‘Thank you,’ she said.

“I never opened it,’ I told her.

“I know,’ she said.”

My grandfather told her, “You asked, and it was a small price to pay. But I don’t really understand.”

“I was given a choice, another chance, to see what life would have been like. My own life, with anyone I wanted. To see what we could have had.”

“I still don’t understand. This is the life we do have.”

“Yes. Today.”

He opened his hand and revealed the locket in his palm. “Is this like in the fairytales? If I had opened this, would I have lost you?”

“Our time together would have ended.”

“Why?”

“It’s okay,” she said, and closed his fingers back around the locket. The last thing he saw before he fell asleep was her smiling down at him.

When he woke up he was twelve again. The locket was still in his hand. He dropped it and sat up, staring at his childhood room and hyperventilating. Outside his door he heard his mom calling for him. She had passed away when he was just out of high school.

When he finally emerged, he discovered that one of his friends was outside waiting on his bike. They were supposed to ride up to the forest. It was the same day he had first received the locket, waiting to be relived.

“I spent the entire ride wondering what it would be like to see her young again,” our grandfather told us now. “But she wasn’t there. She had drowned early that morning in the creek beside her house.”

I looked at my sister. I didn’t know what to say or think. Our grandfather believed what he was telling us. The ache in his voice was real.

“I lived my whole life again, and lived it longer than I had the first time. I kept this locket the whole while, and I never opened it.” He sighed and looked down at it again. He was silent for a very long time. “I always assumed it held a picture of her from around the time I met her. But it was actually who she wanted to be, at the end of the life she wanted to live.”

He looked at it for a few minutes more. Then he closed it again, very carefully but with finality, and slid it back into his pocket.

#

Worst-Case Scenario | Deb Jannerson

1 h 31 min

Nell had been sure that the Missing Child case would be the hardest part of her day.

When she received the call, she was staring at Fiona McCormick's photo. The missing preteen had the sharp, shifty eyes of a fox, a child whose brain had aged quickly with the knowledge that authority is fallible. Bonny McCormick had insisted that her daughter's disappearance was the work of the estranged, and historically abusive, father. This was statistically plausible, but was it an educated guess or a desperate parent's attempt to cling to the evil she knew?

The phone's metallic ring curtailed her thoughts. "Hello?"

"Put Detective Jang on, please," commanded an unfamiliar voice.

"Speaking."

A less astute profiler would have missed his surprised pause. "This is Agent Green, with the LaGuardia Transportation Safety Authority. Chief Hunter referred us to you." The officer cleared his throat over an angry clash of background voices. "We've got a situation here."

1 h 17 min

Flanked by hulking TSA agents, Nell entered the airport through a hidden employee entrance. In one coordinated movement, the suits locked and dead-bolted the door behind her the instant she was inside.

She wondered if they were being paranoid, grasping for control in an effectively uncontrollable situation. She wondered if this had ever happened before.

The often-bustling terminal had already been put on full lockdown. No one said a word as they traveled down the dark halls of empty pretzel stands and magazine shops. In the distance, the lights of Gate 23 beckoned, a lit up square in a ghost town.

She heard the detained civilians before she saw them.

“Listen to me, goddammit! I’m an American citizen with rights. I will not be held hostage by people who should be protecting me!”

The five remaining passengers of Flight #7749 had been ushered into the brightly lit gate lobby. Wire grating had been erected on two sides and locked into place, effectively cordoning Gate 23 off from the rest of the building.

As far as makeshift prisons went, Nell had seen worse, but she had expected a hell of a lot better. *No matter what they claim, she thought, airports are never prepared for the worst-case scenario.*

The TSAs did another coordinated dance of keys and bolts to let Nell into the cage. She joined a slew of LaGuardia security guards and a fair fraction of the Queens Police Department.

The loudest would-be passenger was a plain, middle-aged woman with curly hair. She stood dangerously close to the nearest NYPD officer as she shouted.

“You don’t understand!” She pointed a shaking finger at the locked office door, the only door in their enclosure. “My brother trusted me with his little boy, and they’ve been harassing him since we landed. He’ll be worried sick if we’re not home in the morning. You have to at least let me call him!”

“Ma’am, I understand your concerns,” the officer intoned, nearly robotic. “But the use of cell phones would not be safe at this time. The interference...”

Nell gave the rest of the room a once-over. A young woman in her late teens or early twenties huddled in a chair, crying into her duffel bag. Several seats away, a completely bald man sat with his arm around a young girl. He stared into space, looking exhausted, while her nimble fingers worked over a stack of colorful papers on her lap. Her hands stilled to cup a miniature paper crane, and then she let it fall to the floor to join a dozen mangled relatives.

As they led Nell to the impromptu interrogation office, the agents exchanged looks that she tried not to see.

Agent Holt stared across the bare desk at an adolescent boy. “No one’s accusing you of anything. Remain calm, son. We’re just trying to figure out what happened.”

“This is because of my age! I know it is. This is discrimination!” The boy hopped up and slammed the chair back into the desk with more force than necessary. “And by the way, I’m not your son, so don’t call me that!”

Holt let him storm out, let him have his meaningless moment. Then the agent rubbed his temples and narrowed his eyes at Nell. “You’re the detective? What have they told you so far?”

“Not a lot. Midnight flight to Des Moines, nearly empty, waylaid by an anonymous threat.”

“‘Threat’ may be too strong a word. But as you know, we’re obligated to take such things seriously.” Holt slid a sheet of computer paper across the table. “This is our most detailed photograph. The mirror is with Forensics right now.”

The print-out showed a typically tiny aircraft lavatory. The cameraperson had wedged the folding door at an uncomfortable angle to display the spilled soap and spotty reflection. Across the mirror, in three lines of white liquid letters, was the stark message that had landed Flight #7749:

BOMB. 2 HOURS. HELP.

58 min

Holt spread out five sparse sheets of text. *Adam Cameron, 54. Charlotte Maple, 42. Madison Knoll, 22. Eugene Maple, 17. Faith Cameron, 12.*

“No cameras onboard, I’m guessing.”

“No.” Holt refused to look abashed. “But all of them were spotted near the lavatory before Ms. Cameron found the message at five minutes to takeoff. Except for her father, but given she’s a minor, we have to keep him as well.”

“Why single out the boy?”

Holt scoffed. “His age, for one thing.”

“So you suspect a prank.”

“Or a kid trying to make some convoluted point.” He pulled Eugene Maple’s paper back out and tapped with a chubby finger. “You’ll notice the kid *lives* in Iowa. His aunt brought him here for the National Youth Speech and Debate Tournament.” Holt motioned Nell onto his side of the computer. The web page he had pulled up featured a long *Rank List* and copious photos of awkward, formally dressed teenagers. “He didn’t get very far, but can you guess the final topic?” Holt didn’t wait for a response, just scrolled down and gestured

triumphantly. “‘Acceptable Limits to Freedom of Speech.’ Like whether it should be criminal to falsely cry fire in a theater. Or...”

“...or make false bomb threats,” Nell finished. *I swear, if I got taken away from the McCormick case for a high school thought experiment...* “Anything else suspicious in this crowd?”

“In effect, no. His auntie had a decade-old shoplifting conviction back in Iowa.” The cop flipped from *Charlotte Maple* to *Madison Knoll*. “College Girl got a DUI last holiday season.” He passed over two mostly blank sheets with the same Facebook-esque father-daughter picture, featuring a younger, darker-haired Faith. “No criminal records for the Camerons at all.”

“I take it you’ve already talked to each person.”

“Correct. The Maples are the only headache, and like I said, they were going home. Madison Knoll was headed to her cousin’s wedding and hasn’t done much more than cry since we landed. The Camerons were visiting extended family. Adam’s been cooperative, and, well, you probably noticed Origami Girl out there.”

The agent to Nell’s left landed an elbow in her ribs. “Creepy, right?”

“Let’s be sensitive,” Holt snapped with a glare. “She’s a scared little kid.” *Thank God someone else said it before I had to.* He turned back to Nell and nodded. “I need you to observe this crowd, Jang. Show me some of those profiling chops. No one’s going home tonight until we have some answers.”

Nell switched gears. “Are you absolutely certain someone’s crying wolf?”

“Our team’s dogs haven’t found a thing. We’re still searching the passengers’ phones, but what little luggage they had is cleared.”

Nell suppressed a sigh as she turned back to the door. *Nice sidestep.*

39 min

The suspects gave Nell curious glances but seemed to dismiss her. Finally, Eugene Maple rummaged through his backpack and pulled out a red plastic stopwatch. “We have less than an hour left, just so everyone knows,” he announced.

“Until what?” his aunt asked tiredly.

“Until the *you-know-what* goes off. If it exists.” He pulled himself out of his bucket seat and set the timepiece in the middle of the floor. “Good thing I brought this for my speeches, huh? And even better that it counts down.”

Madison blinked her bleary eyes at it. “So, when that’s done...”

“We get to leave, unless we’re dead,” Eugene finished darkly.

“Gene, is this helpful?” Charlotte retorted, but she made no move to pick the stopwatch up. Like everyone else’s, her eyes were fixed to the red 39, to the flashing numbers moving down and down.

23 min

Eugene stood up and cleared his throat, more dramatically than necessary. “Can I just point out the obvious here? What if the b--... what if it’s *real*? Then we’re all still near it, about to be blown to shit.”

“Language, Gene!”

“Really? You’re gonna lecture me about profanity when we’re all *about to die*!?” A part of Eugene appeared to be enjoying this outlet.

“You know, he’s kind of right,” Madison Knoll broke in, surprisingly angry. “You should let us go, deal with this yourselves. If I’m stuck in New York another day, I don’t even know where I’m staying.”

For the first time since Nell had come back out, a guard spoke to a civilian. Undoubtedly, they had been directed not to engage, but the countdown was eroding everyone’s nerves. “We can’t let you go yet,” he muttered. “We have to be sure no one here poses a danger to others.”

“Do any of us look like terrorists to you?” Madison demanded. The already quiet room became stiller.

“What do you mean by that?” an older cop asked stonily.

“Oh, like you don’t know!”

The other civilians refused to meet her eyes. Even Eugene looked mortified.

“We ought to hold a vote.” This came from Origami Girl’s bald father, heretofore silent.

A hand on Nell's shoulder startled her out of her observation. Holt beckoned her back through the office door, mouthing, *Forensics*.

Picking the phone on his desk back up, he handed Nell a headphone extension. "Shoot."

"The good news is, the aircraft is absolutely clear," spoke a tinny voice.

"Fingerprints?" Holt urged.

"Too many to count. The bathroom hasn't been cleaned since yesterday morning."

Holt's eyes went back to Nell's as he shook his head. His silent imploring served as a belated answer to her question: *He's not sure. Not at all.* "Anything else?"

"The white liquid has been identified as baking soda and salicylic acid."

Nell mulled this over. "Skincare product?"

Holt hissed between his teeth before signing off. "Thank you." He hung up abruptly and leaned into Nell. "It's gotta be the fucking boy. I don't know what more we need."

"Besides a confession."

"Besides a confession," he repeated grimly.

11 min

By the time Nell and Holt reemerged, something in the air had changed. All civilian eyes went to the two of them, resolute. Another pair of agents marched to the enclosure from the other side, but the five passengers' heads didn't turn as their party grew.

None of this appeared to give Holt pause as he approached the teenager. "Come with me, son. Let's try this again."

Eugene balked. "Who's in charge here? Is it you? Because we've decided to go."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We all want to leave." Charlotte stood back up. Her voice was calmer than it had been all night, but a tremor went through her as she glanced at the stopwatch on the carpet. "Keep ourselves safe, no matter what. And if... if something... happens..." She faltered.

"...we'll take legal responsibility," Adam finished.

Holt coughed, and in that cough, Nell heard the lamentations of his entire career path. “I’m sorry. It doesn’t work that way.”

“Well, I’m not going back in there,” Eugene hissed. “So whatever intimidation you’re planning, do it where other people can see.”

A newly arrived agent cleared her throat. “Everybody stand up and keep still, please.” She approached Eugene first, deftly stepping between him and Holt to wave a blue wand over his young body.

“Metal detector? We did that stuff before we got on the plane,” Madison groaned.

“I know, honey,” sighed the other agent, earning a sharp look from his colleague. “We just have to make sure security didn’t miss anything.” Errant strands of Charlotte’s bright hair stood on end as he held the wand to her forehead.

5 min

It was impossible to tell which wand went off first. The staccato beeps brought everyone to full attention, all eyes snapping toward Adam and Madison as the agents’ respective wands began to blink.

“Jackets, please,” the male agent intoned, with an apologetic half-smile to Madison. As a team, the pair laid her black sweater and Adam’s thick green coat on the ground. After a short burrow into pockets, the female agent held up a small bottle opener with raised eyebrows.

“Oh!” Madison clapped a fist to her mouth. “I’m sorry. I forgot--”

“There’s nothing here,” the agent with Adam’s coat interrupted, nodding at four deep pockets turned inside-out at the seams. “With equipment this sensitive, it could potentially be the zipper--”

Nell was there in two long strides. “What is that?” She put her hand on a cinch in the jacket’s inside. A place where the silky black liner had been ripped and mended. When she pulled with both hands, the liner tore open.

A packet of zipties, an unlabeled bottle of pills, and a long, neat coil of fine rope sat on the green canvas. A wadded rag lay stuffed in the edge, smeared with blood and lip gloss. A gag.

The group went silent, lost in the implications of this morbid tableau. But suddenly, Nell's stew of experience and fear boiled into one vital thought: *None of this set off the alarm.*

She looked up just as Adam rammed the two farthest cops to the ground. They scrambled at their belts, but the element of surprise had worked in Adam's favor. With a tiny pair of wirecutters, he slashed at the grating wildly as shouts rose around them.

0 min

By the time security caught up with Adam, he had nearly reached Gate 1. As he ran down the long hall in a zigzag pattern, agents barked into their radios. Some of the suits sprinted after him, while others hustled to shield the civilians, their shaking hands belying their cool demeanors. Charlotte and Eugene cowered in each other's arms as Madison let loose a wordless scream.

The people of Gate 23 watched from a distance as the kidnapper was finally overtaken. His shouts echoed through the empty building. "You don't understand! She's my little girl, and all these damn lies--" Then: an interrupted breath, the metallic sound of a taser.

Sobbing silently, Origami Girl finished an orange bird and set it airborne. Detective Nell Jang pinched the crane, mid-flight, and stood over her. She stared past the hastily dyed hair, past the freckle-shielding makeup, and into the girl's sunken fox eyes. "You can tell us the truth now."

Two Pounds, Two Ounces | Allie Marini

At midnight, I gave birth to a daughter. I named her Katheryn, and kissed both of her cheeks and her perfect little button nose. Even in the maternity wing of the hospital, where babies pay no attention to the hour and are born whenever they feel ready to meet their mothers, it was quiet. The room and the halls were still as the snow falling outside, graceful and slow ballerinas of frozen rain, spinning in a soundless choreography to celebrate Katheryn's arrival. She did not cry. Her eyes were squeezed shut, blocking out the harsh fluorescent light of the room where she was born. Once I'd greeted my daughter properly, the nurse whisked her away to clean and swaddle her. An orderly whose forearms were as bulky and broad as a sailor's navigated my rolling bed down the corridors of the maternity ward and set me to dock in a single room with a window, so that I could see the snow falling. They brought Katheryn back to me, small and pink, wearing a knit purple cap no larger than my fist to hide the parts of her skull which had not developed properly. My husband left the room after they laid her on my breast to feed. She opened her eyes a slit to see me and watch her father's exit. She immediately latched onto my nipple, and I whispered, *Daddy will be back soon, he's just sad right now, baby girl.* Outside, a snow ballet performed beyond the windowpane, and I was eager to miss it, though it was graceful and slow. Inches of snow collected on the ground outside, forgotten in the minutes that passed since Katheryn's birth.

At one a.m. she was weaned already and beginning to crawl. She said *Mama*, as I started to drift from the exhaustion of labor. My nipples were sore from her first teeth, but each time she cried out in hunger I could not bring myself to deny her, and collected her to my chest again. No longer bald, the small purple cap she'd been brought back to me wearing sat on the bedside table now, collecting condensation that beaded and ran from a cup of melted ice chips, not terribly unlike the snow still falling outside the walls of the hospital. A wired controller hung from one of the steel bars of my hospital bed's frame. I used it to dim the lights and turn the television on low. When she was no longer hungry, her head lolled to the side like a Raggedy Ann doll I'd loved when I was a child; the weight of a fabric toy and my small daughter was not all that different. I shifted her position to free up my arm. She whimpered in protest, and then grunted, yielding to her new sleeping arrangement. The murmur of infomercials and the soft glow of the screen fell on Katheryn's sleeping face as the snow outside continued to pirouette and dive down towards the concrete and frozen blades of grass below. I traced the contours of her chin and cheekbones, noticing how like my

mother she looked. When I caressed the soft coils of her ears, still covered in the downy fuzz of infants, she hiccupped and grimaced, revealing the fleeting image of my father, who she also was beginning to resemble. Above her tiny velvet ears, her hair had grown in, draping the ridge of her head in gentle curls, like an edging of tiny O's. Finally, some part of her that looked like me, even if it was only the curls that would frizz and make brushing her hair hurt, like it did mine. She was going to be dark haired, like her father, unless the sun lightened it as she got older. Finally certain she was comfortable and needed nothing other than the security of my form wrapped around her, I allowed myself to fall into sleep with her, as Wilford Brimley whispered a lullaby to me from the television screen about Liberty Medical products and diabetes testing supplies.

Just before five, as dawn began to crest, Katheryn was a big girl, eager to go to school, at the ready with her backpack to go to preschool downstairs in the hospital daycare center. Her hair had lightened a bit, turned reddish-brown, like my mother-in-law's, when she'd been younger. I called Katheryn over to let me brush it. She was tender-headed and complained as I twisted it into pigtails to keep it off of her face. At daybreak, I shut off the television and taught her to read because she was bored and inquisitive, impatient for school to start because she wanted to see what was outside of our hospital room. The snow had stopped falling, but the weight of it had banded together in banks and drifts that sparkled against the sun as it made its way up over the skyline. At the border where earth and air met, the last tide of twilight ebbed toward the other timezones and an unbroken blue lapped its way upward, racing to keep pace with the sun's ascent. It would be a clear day, though the snow would not melt. Katheryn was a fast learner, only tripping a little bit over her vowels, learning *Go Fish* Go faster than I could have ever dreamed possible. By the time she started kindergarten, the sun blinked through the curtains, and she could read as well as any second-grade student.

When breakfast was delivered at 8:30, I drank weak coffee with less cream than I wanted and listened to a streak of Katheryn's happy chatter, playful as a dolphin in the cove of a coastline. Like the snowfall outside at the moment of her birth, she twirled around the room in circles, turning the ordinary fabric of her hospital gown into the glittering spin of a prima ballerina. She did not want to let me brush her hair again to put it into a ponytail, only conceding when her spinning whipped hair into her mouth and made her cough. I brushed it slower and more gently than was my instinct, distracting her from how the bristles of the brush pinched her scalp and made her curls shocky with static. I nodded my head in understanding as she talked about how unicorns had the magic to make chocolate milk out of

sink water, and that riding a rocketship to the stars would take longer than it took to bake cookies on Neptune, which, she said, was a *very long time*.

We watched Sesame Street together until she was *too old for that baby stuff*. She was getting tall and leggy like my mother-in-law; I wanted her to stay small just a little bit longer, so I told her that we were watching Sesame Street because *I* wasn't too old for it, even if *she* was. Though she continued to protest that it was *baby stuff*, she sang along with Elmo and kept counting bananas even after Count von Count had stopped. The day kept morning's promise; it stayed clear. From our floor, we could see the park across the street full of children, tobogganing down the hill and sliding down the icy bars of the playground. Katheryn wanted to join them, and I felt my heart shatter like an icicle falling from the corner of a roof when she asked, *Why?* and the only thing I could tell her was, *Because I'm the Mommy, that's why*. She stamped her bare foot in frustration and sat in the corner with her back turned to me, pulling apart a chain of paper dolls I'd cut out for her from accordioned magazine pages. Lunch came just before one, when she whined, *But MO-OO-OO-OO-OM, it isn't fair!* because I'd said she wasn't old enough yet to have an allowance, and even if she were, there'd be nothing to spend it on except sugary snacks from the vending machine down the hall, which would rot out her teeth.

At three in the afternoon, she wasn't talking to me because she hated me, so I grounded her and watched Oprah. She slammed the bathroom door and sat in the bathtub crying until Oprah's credits rolled and it was almost the end of The Dr. Phil Show. When Katheryn emerged, cloaked in a dense fog of steam and apple-scented shampoo, she was wearing the terry cloth robe I'd packed in my hospital bag. Her long auburn curls were damp and snarled. She handed me a wide-tooth comb she'd found in my toiletry bag and asked me if I could comb her hair out, but gently, because sometimes I pulled too hard. With her back turned to me, she said she was sorry for being mean and that she loved me, while I worked the knots out of her hair slowly. I was happy that she couldn't see me crying. I gave her a hug that lasted longer than she wanted, but shorter than I did. Outside, it had begun to snow again as the sun swooped low against the edge of the horizon. The park emptied in threads, as families made their way back home to start cooking dinner and warm up the kids, whose cheeks were the rosy color of summertime apples, despite the fact that winter had just settled into the air.

When supper was served at six, Katheryn was dressed in a cap and gown. She wasn't valedictorian, but she was a solid student, earning a scholarship to a good state school where she wanted to study library science. She loved to read because I had taught her early. She was going out with her friends, she said, to celebrate, and she'd be home by curfew, even though

I'd told her that at her age, she didn't need one anymore. She said *I'll call if I'm going to be late, promise*, and I knew that she would. Outside, the snow came down faster, less like a ballet performance and more like a solitary sprinter at a runner's meet. Almost like the snowflakes were chasing the sun, as somewhere on the other side of the equators, dawn broke and the snow melted into an early morning sunshower. I watched reruns and missed her until she came back at ten. She was again dressed in a cap and gown, and had earned a degree in the care, indexing and archiving of the thing she held most dear, books. I asked her to live at home for her first few years working, because I'd miss her too much if she took a job far away. She kissed me and said, *I'll think about it*. It had grown colder outside; I could tell because the rooftops played music, like the tinkling of a xylophone. The dark night sky scattered hailstones, tiny and perfectly round, as though the tops of buildings were the ideal place to shoot marbles. I fell asleep as the games and music of winter's meteorology continued outside, bored by reality shows and prime-time dramas. Nothing on television was even close to being as interesting as my fast-growing daughter, who looked more and more like her father the older she got. Her eyes, though, everyone agreed: she inherited those from me. Like her curls, they were the only traces of myself I could find in the constellation of ancestors who came together to make up her form. When the news came on at eleven, Katheryn had fallen in love with a young man who worked alongside her in the library's history archives. They loved books as much as they loved each other. He asked me for permission to marry her just as the hail outside slowed, and then stopped altogether. He promised to be kind to Katheryn, to be a good husband, like her father. If the weather outside paid him the respect of silence while he asked for her hand, who was I to say no?

Katheryn floated down the aisle, beatific as any of Raphael's angels in the antique lace of her great-grandmother's wedding dress—it was, of course, her choice to wear it, because she knew the value of things like antique lace and first edition prints. I stood next to her, dressed in the blue hospital scrubs I'd brought her into the world wearing; the finest garb any mother of the bride could ask to be dressed in. The chilly windowpane revealed that beyond it, the snow had begun again. This time, though, it fell slow and dizzy, like it had at her birth; maybe a little slower, even, less measured and more emotive. A waltz: there were two dancers now. The old-fashioned lace of Katheryn's dress reflected back the color and history of the snow drifts outside. Under the bright moonlight of a waxing gibbous, the delicate lace, like the tatted edges of spun snow, gave off the peaceful flush of everything that's perfect and symmetrical under the cover of nighttime. Before I pulled the veil down over her face, I kissed both of her cheeks and her perfect little button nose. She took one last breath, opened her eyes wide as the galaxy above, and smiled at me before turning toward her new life.

At midnight, her father returned to give her away. He took Katheryn from my arms and handed her slight, two-pound, two-ounce body to the nurse who'd cleaned and swaddled her, the one who'd picked out a tiny purple hat to cover the small, empty part of her head, to protect it from the open air and to protect us from having to remember, even if it was only for twenty-four short hours. *Thank you for letting us have one day with her*, he told the nurse, and she nodded, as though it were something that she could have changed with a scratch of her pen on the clipboard. The halls were as quiet as they had been when she was born. The chill of the winter air flitted in with the doors opening. Against the bluish caulk of nighttime, our snowy ballet had slowed to an almost standstill. Like lacy good luck charms, the snowflakes seemed nearly suspended in the air for long moments that stretched out, before they glided their way down to land with the rest of their brethren, jacketing the concrete and frozen blades of grass. The attending doctor knocked on the door, checked the fragile form of my daughter cradled in the arms of the kind nurse who knitted baby caps in the break room, and called the time of death. The nurse, who made sure all the fibers she used to knit preemie caps were soft and hypoallergenic, brought Katheryn back to me once more before she took her away. Like I had on the moments that she flared and flickered, I kissed both of her wintery cheeks and her perfect button nose. My husband held my hand tightly, but was gentle as he collected me into his arms and kissed my forehead. I buried my face into the midnight blue of his sweatshirt, wicking away the moisture, as if snowflakes had landed on my cheeks and melted. Outside, like ballerinas of frozen rain, the flurry swirled and dipped, spinning down the stage of cold air before disappearing behind the curtain of a snow bank over the hospital's frozen lawn.



graphique: Collages as dialogues about human 13.56.06 | Alexander Chernavskiy



graphique: Portfolio 18 | Guilherme Bergamini

2

poesía

Time's Wordless Tome | David M. Alper

Language's imprecision is
simultaneously face-saving and infuriating:

you take "a moment to think;"
how long do you need?

"In a moment"
in all probability means rather shortly;

"for a moment" is a flash
of potential misinterpretation

or emotion that flees like a brisk breeze;
"at the moment" conjures up a coy

period of time: however long now is,
or until something changes.

"At any moment" is a tumbling taking-over
of trenchant theorecticals,

like some Slinky on a cosmic staircase,
and when you're "in the moment," you act,

often knowing when "the moment has passed,"
but can you say how long it was,

or precisely when its seconds may intersect
with a cognitive instant?

Walls | Shanita Bigelow

we make new noise sound heavy pause	we careen under care of worn hands embrace	we in the midst of slow tunes	we are modern drum talking circle keep away
we crinkle weight crack at ceiling thin	we are yellow proud boast cream silhouette	we are refractors of light light heavy search	we are magnified virtue talking drum keep away
we shift weight inhabitants settle in	we are reminders of their loss of us	we are lone signifiers of age of words left for dead	we are day hymns not to be sung night wash undone
we are moot in majesty of her we whisper back	we are strong enough we are not too pale to pass through	we are strong enough we have no pasts	we are colored tapestry thin we hold truth in vain
we carry song blood smooth	we are weary weary	we present findings slim	we are long death untold
we wait back	we watch shadow pass time	we sweat summer heat morning dew	we are herald years to come

Portuguese Cats Being Spayed Benefit from Listening to Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings but Suffer from AC/DC's "Thunderstruck"

| Dave Brennan

I experienced an intense desire for a music that was not music.

For a melody, caricatural, cut from sheet metal; for a rhythm framed in bent wire and balloons.

An orchestra of door knockers and junked thingamajigs, guns and gold, pitchforks and oil cans.

The song of the anaconda swallowing the monkey, or the one where we ride old bicycles down to the border of chaos, which is the border of memory, which is the sound of everything extended forward.

It is often better in life not to have a dream

packed away in a suitcase, or set to boil like bone broth in a crock on the kitchen counter. Ladle and a bowl of grease. Keepsakes and

a chorus of object, a utilitarian aria:

our pain, our love.

Isn't it my undoing, over and over, to sing the repurposed worth of everything.

Quebrada(s) | Roberto Carcache Flores

The verb *quebrar* means to break,
though it is more often
used with silverware
than hearts. A *quebrada*
is a dry ravine or a current
of broken things (litter, bodies
and debris). In countries
like mine, a *quebrada* can be
someone's neighborhood, a
communal sink, where
lovers meet. It is also
the first place to look
for the disappeared,
as if they are hiding
from us and not broken.
Is it a coincidence here
that *quebrada* is a
feminine noun?

In The Schoolyard | Ruben Cota, Jr.

They called me that word, their word,
And it hurt.

You wrote me from prison, saying
You loved me.

I wrote back, Daddy,
I don't wanna be a spic, white passing,
Different.

I don't want them to say things,
Laugh at me, call me a faggot.

You never wrote back.

Now I'm quiet, with a spoon in my hand,
Digging holes to bury the flowers I stole.

Geology of a Marriage | William Cullen Jr.

Across this great divide
we cannot connect
but only throw barbs
and stones thinking
each defends one's turf
but the ravine
between us
fills up
with our rubble
until at last we
will walk across
too old to remember
either love or hate
when we meet
in the middle.

Dawn's Song | Dawn Cunningham

*Come here Baby Boo, my Precious.
Let Mom wash-a-way the day.*

Need to write, and write more.

On the mountain sat a hunter—in a tree stand with a bow and arrows, with binoculars, with bait and call.

*Close your eyes and let all your troubles drift away.
Fall asleep. Let the thunder not frighten you.*

Really want to discuss the incident

between Vinny and Ginny.

The hunter must survive the long haul from the stand to the cabin southwest from here.

*The man on the moon
looked down upon you*

Too tired.

Two bears lurk in the distance but the hunter is not allowed to kill them unless they attack—against the rules.

*The man on the moon
smiled right back at you*

Garry's on the game again. The hunter has only fifteen minutes to get to the cabin, alive, and hopefully without killing or maiming a bear.

The man on the moon
winked at you, to say

Have been wanting to cry. The hunter isn't quiet enough as he comes down from the stand, or the bears are downwind from the hunter.

Close your eyes, the sandman
will come your way

Need to cry. Pressing to run, the hunter moves across snow and bare patches hearing the snorts, the panting, the calling of bears.

Not enough time. Will the hunter stop and kill the closest bear or keep running?

*The night is thick
With oncoming dew
With the stars caressing
The sky with hue*

Vinny's taken over now. Time has come to ten minutes;

Never alone long enough. ten minutes—will the hunter last?

The man on the moon
looked down upon you

Never know when someone will pass through.

Don't have my own room with a door.

Need to cry—for me.

The man on the moon
smiled right back at you

Pressing on, in fear of a third bear being present, for it has happened before, the hunter thinks about climbing a tree and turning about to kill.

Another day of need to cry.

The man on the moon
winked at you, to say

The hunter fights against these ideas and adds, *if only I could shed my bow and arrows to see if I could run faster.*

Garry asks for the credit card to buy cigarettes.

Close your eyes, so the sandman
will come your way

Yes, faster, that is what the hunter needs to do, but pressing has no more power.

I tell him no.

*A cricket will serenade you
Until a sunray crows
While a breeze flies
To tuck in your toes*

The sound of crunching snow and slapping branches and scratching brushes grows louder in the hunter's ears just as the breathing of bears close in.

**He comes instantly irritating in his stature, then yells at the girls
when they go joyously by into the kitchen—getting along
with each other for a change!**

*The man on the moon
looked down upon you*

Five minutes.

My youngest asks, “What is wrong with Dad?” I turn and say, “Your dad is being a bitch because he doesn’t have his cigarettes.

*The man on the moon
smiled right back at you*

Will the hunter make it?

And then I get jumped! The cabin is in sight and the hunter pants, still pressing speed, still pressing to run, still carrying weight, weight with sweat and itchy fingers.

*The man on the moon
winked at you, to say*

For what! Where is it the hunter has to reach in the cabin—the door, the sliding window, the porch?

*Close your eyes, so the sandman
will come your way*

Using his own terminology against him! The bears are on the heels of the hunter, running, breathing, snorting—slash!

KILLED
KILLED
KILLED
GAME OVER
CLICK START TO BEGIN AGAIN

Grab my journal and pen.

I’m in the bathroom now, sitting, pooping, and still don’t have time to cry, though the tears are right there, ready to spill. On the mountain sits a hunter—in a tree, in a stand with bow and arrows, with binoculars, with bait and call.

Little Ginny's playing the game now. The hunter must survive the long haul from the stand to the cabin southwest from here.

I look into the mirror, put on my glasses. The hunter went the wrong direction.

*Birds have curled in
For their nightly nap
The endless moonshine
Heaven's night cap*

My glasses are crooked. Two bears lurk in the distance, but the hunter is not allowed to kill them unless they attack—against the rules.

*The man on the moon
looked down upon you*

My whole life is crooked. The hunter only has fifteen minutes to get to the cabin, alive, and hopefully without killing or maiming a bear.

*The man on the moon
winked at you, to say*

I attempt a brief cry. Pressing to run, the hunter moves across snow and bare patches with silence behind, no panting, no snorts, no calling of bears.

*Close your eyes, so the sandman
will come your way*

Only one tear falls. The hunter need not stop to kill, any bear, anywhere;

*Raccoons use Mores Code
For quiet conversing
And the air breathes deeply
Of the sandman's blessings*

Why? the hunter presses to speed on the way.

*The man on the moon
looked down upon you*

Need to cry. Time has come to ten minutes;

*The man on the moon
smiled right back at you*

And when I look in this mirror I see ugliness ten minutes—surely the hunter
and beauty—ugliness seems to be winning. will make it.

*The man on the moon
winked at you, to say*

It isn't only my outside self I see. Pressing on without fear of one bear, or two bears,
not even three bears; this has never happened before.

*Close your eyes, so the sandman
will come your way*

Garry just came in and spoke in his condescending tone—

*The man on the moon
looked down upon you*

“Hey, Dawn, what are you doing?” Faster, no need to go faster. **What the hell**
does he think I’m doing? The cabin is in sight. **He can see.** Two minutes.

*The man on the moon
smiled right back at you*
*The man on the moon
winked at you, to say*

Sitting on the edge of the tub writing. One minute. **Can't hide here either.**
50 seconds. **If I leave he'll call the cell phone.** 40 seconds. **Turn it off, get home,**
and hell breaks because Just on the cabin porch. **he couldn't call me.** 20 seconds.
He yells, "Write in there, Garry's a bitch, a bitch." Where? Where? **Already have.**

Congratulations you have Succeeded!

*Close your eyes, so the sandman
will come your way*

Let Love Be a Burning Bush | Jeni De La O

You, every vertebrae
crack
crack
crack,
every
you, every vertebrae oh,
you, every
crack
crack
open shells
very, you salty on my oh,
salty you, stretching
spine to sky to
you to sky to crack the sun
and
ah, and ah and oh, tender sorrows,
oh
cherry blossoms, oh
broken disk drive
blossoms
oh, tender, oh broken cracked
oh tender you
stretching ah against ah against
oh, gentle heat that
oh, it floats, feel it oh, heat that
floats ah between our oh between our

you, crack
crack
 crackling sizzle oh, sizzle in the
 you of summer, in the
bake, oh bronze, in the
 ah ah breeze of
 blooming,
oh bloom in ah, just yes,
 just
ah just under
 skin, blooming, oh soft
red, oh, salty red heat of
you, cracking sh sh shells, oh, you,
 a
 blazing bush oh, oh holy, blazing
ah, holy, burning
oh, blazing softly,
 burning, ah ah holy, you.

Prayer for my Mother | Jeni De La O

Lord, not me so
let to be has
me wither a she;
be when quiet, but
a she happy this
succulent. looks surprise person
To past when to
sit me, she person
upon to does thing
her blazing notice just
window buganvilia me; isn't
sill, fluttering and working.
and in never So,
take the may Lord,
up breeze; I if
only and grow I
the to spikes, can
space never in ask
prescribed, ask case you
and for she just
not more one one
need than day thing,
much-- having wants please,
a once to let
little been hold me
water, a me. be
when novelty. I a
she I have succulent.
remembers pray, tried,
me; let and

Grassman | Dom Fonce

I'm not supposed to believe
in the Grassman, that walking shag,
shambling Yggdrasil limb, soul of tree let loose.

The things seen with child
eyes in backyards on backroads
are, at the very best, unreliable—
I understand this.

And we humans snatch mind
flickers like web threads
tugging on ragweed frames—we distort and misplace
images by the landslide—and the bodies on deathbeds,
the fists sent through doors, the sobbing
on floors are dungeon-ghouls we shackle
to recession. The sponge that
stamps the top of our necks,
and its runny nature, is reason
enough for given pause.

It's true.

I may've misremembered.

I may've only glimpsed what I wanted
to see the most.

To this day, I've never again
witnessed a blade of grass dance
the way it did to me in that adolescent spring.

Science says no mossy rug
can grow veins and tendons
and roam the woods
in isolation. I know. I know. I know.

I'm not supposed to believe
in the Grassman. that peat specter,
dandelion tramp, beast of Mother Earth.

Yet, I do.

Stray Song | Rich Glinnen

Its swampy song
Clammers through my window,
Rounding both of my cats
From slumber,
Inviting them
To screw

“They’re fixed,” I inform the
Stray, bare-bellied, barely buzzed,
“There ain’t nothin’ in them”

All three are undeterred
By this—what I deemed—
Useful information. Still
They stare—a standoff.

Perhaps the vagrant hopes
A certain melody
Will regenerate
Ovaries and testes
(Not sure how the
Stray swings)

Either way, its got
A better shot
At love
Than most.

Tomatoes | Robin Gow

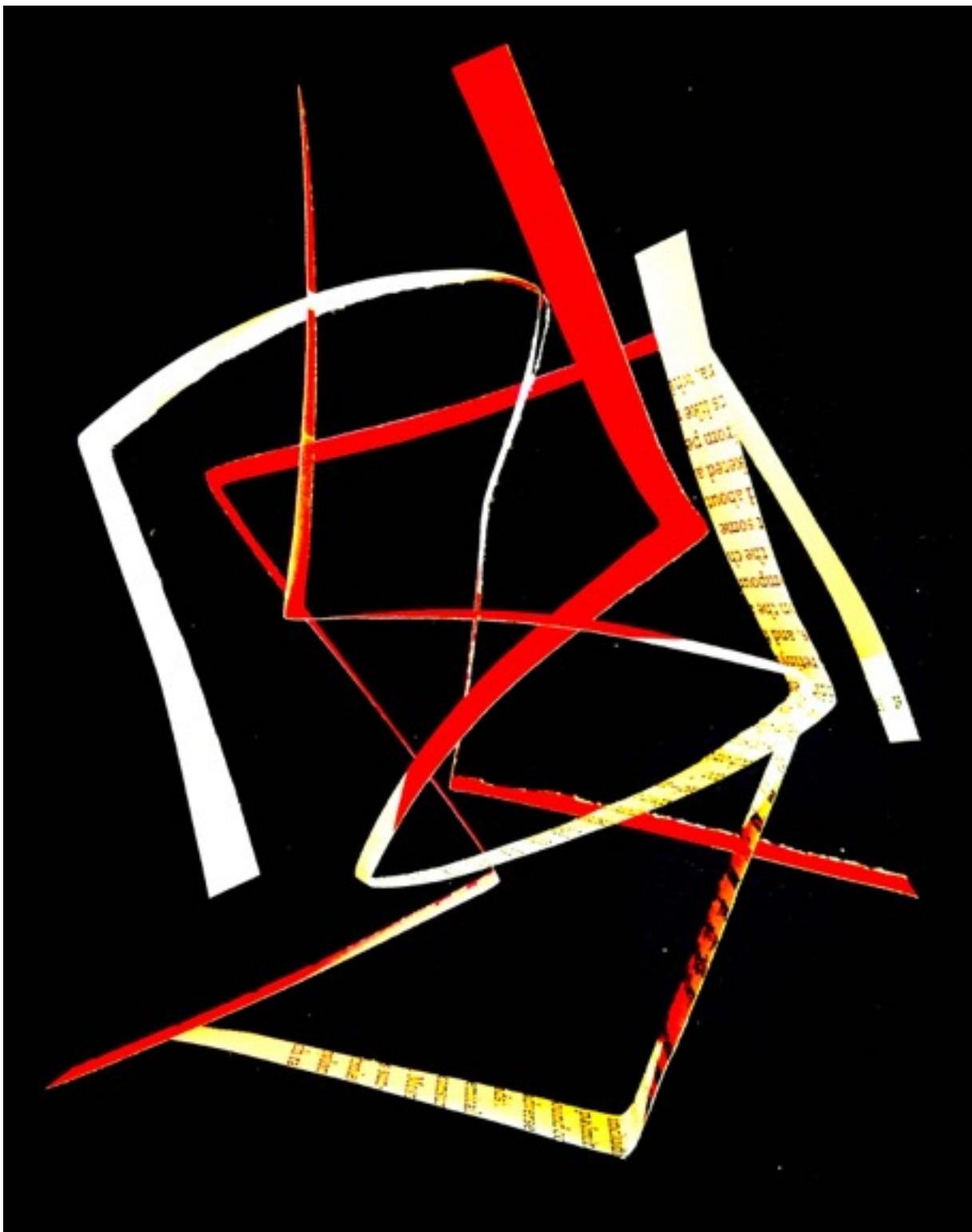
i made a cutting board into
a bed. the knives are in the trunk
with the rest of the kitchen.
how many chambers are there to the heart
when it's an heirloom tomato?
thick & asymmetrical, a blooming face.
i got the yellow from my father &
the red we learned when we were
still chewing the alphabet pink.
the gnats swarm all over the racks
of tomatoes at the farm, landing
on every pockmark & scar-- onyx
bodies gone angry-- a collar on my neck.
they're good for BLTs, or, at least,
that's what the farmers say.
sitting on milk crates, acidic
blood dripping down their elbows.
the bacon finds its way, raw & fatty
creeping & tightening like my father's
worn leather belts, smacked across me.
i turn you over in the kitchen,
above the granite table where all
slicing will be done. give me your
sun-burning down-- your mouth empty
of red. i want to lay open
& dress in salt. i want to hear
you fresh & spitting stone.
everyone keeps a jar of mayonnaise at
the back of the fridge where we could
hide to be safe until the family
orders italian hoagies again. salami
as a sunday hat, peppercorns in our dress shoes.
i love to see you like this,
among the tomatoes, plastic bag sitting.
this is all bruises you know?
we'll eat them standing up &
tomatoes will taste like the backseat.

New Pants | Sara Matson

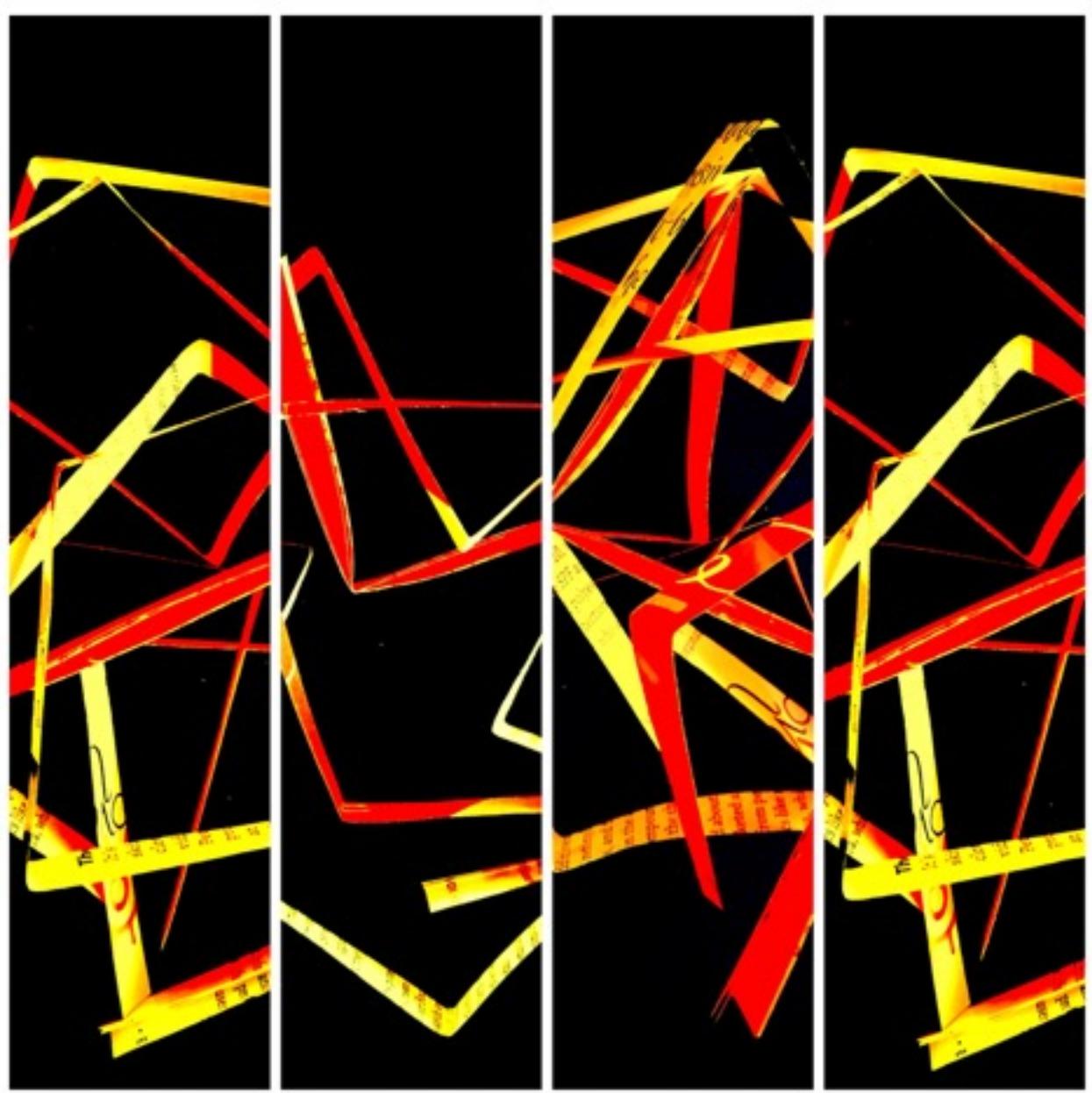
i made a spider for her
queen of the gene (of the leg)
that's strange ////
how
wide
(you have a lo-o-o-ong time)
she is a kind of dream
(weathered) boat
cheese is right
in your popcorn – teeth like small crispy marshmallows

(such things ((the grain)) asked her on her 6th birthday)
since, she has grown between
terracotta pots +
second cousins slightly
tilted /// but don't blow it away
i (have) disposed of it
please make sure we (do not) break it on
the nail
your dead child
(still dead)
your husband
(still husbanding)
sunbathes in the evidence

For The Third Time | Kelly Nelson



"Nothing Except That" | Kelly Nelson



Love Is Totally Legal #2 | Thomas Osatchoff

LOVE IS TOTALLY LEGAL
FLAMETHROWERS
LICKING TIME
LOVE IS TOTALLY LEGAL
FLAMETHROWERS
LICKING TIME
LOVE IS TOTALLY LEGAL
FLAMETHROWERS
SHEMORHLEIWI
TODAY ATTAVOL SI LOVE

Major Arcana | Bella Pori

She asked me once how
it felt to lose
but I did not oblige her
and instead spit on the ground
told her to read it
like a Tarot card
and tell me what she
thought of my chances.



graphique: Black, White and Grey #1 | Allen Forrest



graphique: Black, White and Grey #7 | Allen Forrest



graphique: IMG_8211 | Jim Zola



graphique: ooo | Elina Ghanbari

3
essai

Cabbage Pat Kids | Joshua Adair

Since 1983 my paternal grandmother has been trying to traffic a passel of kids conceived in a patch.

I recently visited her house for the first time in the fifteen years or so that we've been estranged. She's now 90 and not well, crumbling among her countless collectibles. That day my dad whisked her away for a lunch out and a cemetery visit so that my mother and my partner could creep in and clean up.

My first mission was to find her artificial Christmas tree -- stored in one of the three unused bedrooms on the second floor -- that my father could not find. As I climbed the mottled orange shag matted on the stairs, I re-discovered the cadre of Cabbage Patch Kids she purchased the year the line launched when my older brother, younger sister, and I were all rabid to have one of our own.

They were sitting there still, unsullied, in a pyramid that parallels the opening credits from "The Brady Bunch," if the cast had been a bunch of nerdy newborns. Not one has ever -- not even once -- escaped from their cheerfully embellished cardboard and cellophane cells. There are six total -- enough that each of us could have had a pair -- including the most sought-after identical twin double-box. Those babies, purchased as an "investment," haven't aged a day in thirty years, though my hair has grayed and crow's feet crease my eyes.

Grandma, you see, had been insistent that she would find those kids the moment she learned my mother meant to have them for us. She lived for a rivalry -- especially with her daughter-in-law -- and that required victory at any cost. A year or two earlier she had low-balled Mom on the sale of a collection of valuable antique glassware because she knew she wanted the proceeds to buy Christmas presents for us. If she controlled the capital she knew she could outshine mom as a sadistic Santa Claus.

For grandma, Christmas meant competition and conflict -- both of which she welcomed.

After weeks of desperate searching on both their parts, Grandma got the call that our local Farm King had finally gotten a shipment of kids from the land of cabbage. She informed Mom she would be at the store the next morning when the doors opened, which Mom took to mean she would grab three, if she could, for us kids.

This was a misapprehension.

Instead, she was extending an invitation to engage. She was daring Mom to outdo her by acquiring some cabbage-y kids of her own.

As she often did when it came to out-shopping others, Grandma emerged with the twins and two singles after paying their hefty price and grinding her heel into the hands of at least a dozen desperate, doting mothers.

Quick as she could, she called mom and announced her victory upon returning home. "How much do I owe you?" she asked, still oblivious to Grandma's game.

"Owe me?"

"For the kid's dolls? I hope you didn't pay too much. You know we can't afford that."

Her question was met with a cackle. She wasn't about to adopt those plastic-headed preemies out to my parents.

When we arrived for our usual Christmas Eve at dad's parents', we were astonished by the pile of Cabbage Patch Kids stacked up in the corner. Grandma, coy and cloying, never mentioned their presence and instead insisted we eat dinner before any packages were peeled open. Mom looked anxious and angry as we wolfed down our overdone pizza and peppered everyone with questions about what Santa would be serving us up that year.

As the gift giving got underway, we kept locking stares with the unblinking babies in the corner; they appeared equally astonished that no adoption appeared imminent. Instead, we were showered with gifts we neither wanted nor liked -- tube socks, handkerchiefs, and, for me, a plastic baseball mitt. She meant to pull me away from newborn nursing and coax me into catching balls instead?

When the unpleasing packages were all parceled out, we each stared in uncertainty waiting for someone to say the phrase that would catapult those kids out of their captivity into our loving care. No such solution issued forth.

Instead, my parents, clearly dismayed at having to leave those four in such an unfit environment, chided us into gathering ourselves together and escaping before Santa's arrival.

My sister, as she was wont to do, however, wasn't having it. She had to know who was playing legal guardian to those lost souls. "Grandma," she ventured, "who gets those babies?"

First came the cackling. Finally she'd get her chance to show us all, but especially my mother, that she'd won. Then came the answer: "why them are mine, Mandy! Those are gonna be valuable some day!"

For the woman whose favorite admonition was "there will be tears before bedtime," she self-fulfilled her own prophesy that night. My sister broke down immediately. In a fit of pique, I attempted to ameliorate the moment by licking the fancy frost patterns on the aluminum screen door on our way out. My tongue stuck like a fly on a strip. In just a second, I too was tearful and taken aback by the turn of the evening -- and my forcefully detached tongue stung and bled. Suddenly everything stunk of cabbage.

Once we got home, mom promised my sister and me that we need not belabor our histrionics because all would work out well. Moments later, from outside the closed bedroom door I heard her excoriating my father in a stage whisper about what kind of woman had raised him. We still ask that question to this day.

Four or five hours later when we dragged our despondent parents from bed, demanding to be ushered downstairs to our holiday delight, they reluctantly complied. Mom always carefully created little vignettes in various chairs for each of us to find our Christmas magic. She insisted that we could not enter the living room until everything was just so, with the tree lit and the stockings appropriately plumped. She knew what she was doing; her work never failed to enchant.

When we finally entered the room in a miniature stampede I imagine to be not dissimilar from the one Grandma had caused to get her Cabbage Patch Kids, we found no boxes full of babies. Thanks to Grandma, Mom really and truly had not been able to get us the "it" gift that year. Instead, she had somehow managed to find knock-off yarn-haired plastic heads from a craft supplier that she made into her very own Cabbage Pat Kids. You guessed it; Mom's name is Pat.

My doll wore handmade denim overalls and a striped t-shirt. To me he looked just like the ones Grandma held hostage hoping to hit gold. As improbable and reminiscent of O Henry as it might sound, I think we really loved what she'd done and didn't feel cheated not to have gotten one of those mass-produced, commercial kids.

If that sounds like an unlikely response for a Cabbage-consumed kid, I'm willing to concede it could be. I may be participating in a slightly shaded revisionist history, but I don't think so. From this vantage, and that's what matters now anyway, I deeply admire my mother's imagination, creativity, and diligence. She gave us something much more valuable and long-lived than a fading fad when she listened to what we wanted and worked to give it to us as best she could.

The next year Mom insisted that we get "the real thing" and she succeeded. Those dolls were nice and we loved them, but in a second-best sort of way that rendered them mostly superfluous. Joey -- that was mine's name -- really was just a regular Joe, generic and indistinguishable from his identical creepy clones -- differentiated only by their names -- that my friends had been given that year. Handmade made the difference.

There is magic and meaning in improvisation.

As for Grandma, she's still waiting on that second wave Cabbage-craze that will make her rich and finally find a permanent home for those kids she only collected for the cash.

119 Voices: My Wild Room | Alicia Drier

I have met many wild things in my life, from booger-filled brothers, to prowling kitten claws, to things that slither in the corners of my imagination. And likewise the wild has come to visit me with these wild things—breathing down my neck from the edge of a cliff face, whispering between pungent pine needles overhead, dancing on the back of an unexpected mountaintop sunrise. For true wildness is less about location and more about the living.

I used to go to such a place to meet the wild things every day. There was no traveling “through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year” to get there, but time had been known to misbehave in my room. Minutes could feel like millennia, and likewise seconds could slip by too quickly—most likely because the clock on the wall was almost always broken.

Outside this room, there were blue rectangular boxes that some wild things used to store battered books and too-thin jackets and sticky crumbs from shared donuts that had spoiled their appetites. Through the 119 door, there were three walls of white and one of purple, the kind of purple that was sincere and bright, reminiscent of star-shaped spring flowers and sunsets that have exploded into too many colors to count. Each wall was quilted with postcard-shaped markers that were emboldened by catchy phrases—things like “A person’s a person no matter how small!” and “Save the drama for your llama,” and “Some days you’re the pigeon; some days you’re the statue.” There were posters of book covers and maps of Hogwarts, author Facebook profile pages and a collage of wildly colored Billy Shakes cartoon heads. On the purple wall with the door, there was also one metal-framed bulletin corkboard, covered with a teal piece of fabric and an assortment of bright photos that encourage good behavior among the wild things.

Perhaps my appeal to this place where the wild things were was genetic. My father made a career out of taming wild things, his arguably wilder than mine in their teeth-gnashing, middle school gruff. My training allowed me the stronger ones, the survivors, those whose skin was lizard-thick from years of puberty and the entrance into high school. But when I myself was tiny and untamed with small razor teeth, my father’s wild things towered above me, a forest of legs and body odor and excitingly foreign elements of the adolescent world.

I can still remember late afternoons and evenings stretched out in my father's own wild room. These times often felt longer than they really were, more because I was hungry than bored. And yet, food was always readily available for tiny paws and hands—small M&M packets that I would rip open and divide by color before devouring, Bazooka bubble gum wrapped in comics whose text I couldn't quite yet read on my own, pretzels and juice boxes packed with love by a mother who was somewhere else juggling her home and a fulltime career. I remember the smell of chalk across my child-chubby fingers as I developed an elaborate fresco of a whale diving in and out of the waves that doubled as the bottom tray of the chalkboard. I remember the wobbly, leather-squeak feel of my father's tall taming chair beneath me as I wagged a long stick at my little brother and assigned him homework of elaborate proportions. It could be argued my brother was my first wild thing in those days, although I'm not entirely sure if I ever succeeded in taming him.

Back when I knew how to get there, my own wild room was divided into three sections. First were the desks, an oddly numbered 29 in all. Each of them was made out of mismatched plastic and metal pieces, combined to make a seat and a variously sized desktop—no two desks were actually alike. Some had shelves under the seat for wild things to place their books; others had only the remnant marks of where such a shelf used to be, before it was torn away by wild claws. The desks were covered in the claw marks of previous inhabitants—a long-gone couple's initials encased in a heart here, a cartoon caricature there, declarations like “ALGEBRA FUCKIN SUCKS,” all in capital letters.

Just in front of the desks is the place I called my training space. It consisted of about six good feet of tiled floor between the whiteboard and the desks of my wild things. Some days, these few inches were all I had to raise my chair up in defense against the lion's mouth; other days, I was front and center in my own one-woman show, while the wild things grunted and snorted in approval. As an added precaution, I also kept a podium in my training space, one extra barrier between the wild things and me, especially during the season of a full moon.

Of all my furniture in my wild room, none of it was brand new. Maybe that's all the explanation needed for my old podium, propped up on a set of whimpering wheels and marred by large teeth marks where someone gnawed away a wood-and-plastic corner. My personal desk resided in the far front corner of the room, nestled between windows overlooking an asphalt driveway and a heater that only worked on the warmer days of the year. It used to be covered in empty tea mugs and paperclips the size of my fist, boulders with things painted on them like “Theater Rocks” and a daily calendar with tearaway inspirational quotes, a rubber Shakespeare duck from Stratford-upon-Avon, England, and a

ragtag jumble of wires connected to some machine or another. My emergency lion chair sat behind it, covered in a faded mustard pleather, also with strange teeth marks here and there where the foam and fabric covering has been pulled back to reveal the chair's metal frame.

Finally, in the far left corner of my room against the purple wall with the door, there was a space dubbed "the reading corner." It evolved over the years, beginning with only with a few dog-eared, spine-crackled novels on one sad, brown bookshelf and ending with two black metal bookshelves bursting with brain food. No matter what I tried, I could never quite keep the shelves filled to my liking. It seemed, when I wasn't looking, wild things often shuffled over on hairy knuckles to stuff a few books under their arms and skitter away to some other part of the room. I'd find their literary contraband—pieces of the library I'd personally stocked—later shoved somewhere into a corner of their nests, hiding at the back of their blue hallway boxes, on the shelves of an old used bookstore across town for sale.

And such was my wild room. There was no air conditioning in the summer, and the heat never really filled the room in the winter. Most days, the windows wouldn't open without a good shove, and when it rained, water leaked through the panes onto my ever-present pile of papers. There were minuscule wood splinters sticking out of the purple wall by the door where a wild thing pulled a pencil sharpener from its screwed-in anchoring in a moment of anger. And yet it was all these imperfections, these eye-roll-worthy blemishes that marked the years I spent in that space. They were the pieces of my soul that seeped into the walls and the desks and the floor tiles.

It has been two years since I've been able to call a classroom my own—two scorching Augusts when I've shivered at an office desk instead of smelling the natural musk of warmed teenage wild things. At times, it feels as if my time in room 119 was all a dream, but then I hear it again—that shoe-squeak rhythm keeping time to the flap of bags being upended and zippers singing their monotone tune—and in a flash, I am back in that hallway outside 119 with them again.

Such was my life as a high school English teacher for five years, five years of zoo-keep and hope and fostering wild dreams. Even now, my wild things may never know is what they have done for me. In their wild eyes, I was reminded of love and effort and expectations, of dreams and a future yet uncharted, of a world still worth waiting for. Their claw marks are ever in my heart as I feel them still, daily slinking toward me, all wide-eyed and uncertain as I hold out a mouthful or two of knowledge. For isn't there still a bit of wildness in us all?

“Garden Terrace” is a Generous Name for “Underground” | Teresa Morse

When we saw the apartment we said all the things you’re supposed to say, look at all the closet space and it’s so open, reliable phrases on the metronome, and when we moved in we said we have so much space and we put closet things into the closets, the iron and tote bags and bottles of quarter-inches of air freshener evading straws, and the couch went against one wall and then against the other, and the boxes unfolded and black frames framed zigzags of white space, and all went quiet until it got loud. Last mosquito bites fading from calves and ankles and we hear them stomping above us, thundering judgment, and they don’t smile when we smile passing them on the stairs, they don’t smile until now when the boxes are taped, and I consider that day in the pool when strangers ask, and in the rare vulnerability of the chlorine-blind I don’t know what to tell them except for the honesty that beats from my ribs and falls from my tongue, yes, our upstairs neighbors brought in roaches, and the woman makes the face, and how do I tell her that like split ends once you see one roach you’ll start seeing dozens until you learn to stop looking. Now the boxes stand at attention, empty and collapsed, and we unfold them to fold them differently and tape screeches from the roll and litanies pass through our hands, champagne glasses and bottle openers and corks we can’t remember why we kept, wool socks and ankle socks and single socks begging optimism for mates, expired pills rattling in orange plastic cages, books about the mystery we call God, the mystery we call bread, the mystery we call poetry, jam jars of thumbtacks and rubber bands, forgotten coupons for cheese, for fish oil capsules, pens with teeth-collapsed caps, all the things that make up this life in this place, and we say next month we won’t live here and next week we won’t live here and I can’t believe it even though we can, because the plants died when they didn’t get enough sun, the coleus and the bluebonnets and the towering basil and the parsley that wouldn’t take and the third mint plant stained by spider mites, and only the fern is left and it survived even though I dumped it out of its pot. It’s almost over but I’ll always be here, blond curls trapped along the baseboards, buried deep in the shower drain pipe, twisting the shutters just so and inhaling the afternoon glow when the sun can make it through the trees and into my lungs. In five days we’ll stack boxes deep in a truck and place keys into palms that aren’t ours and drive out for a last time, away from the place where I learned to let the kudzu crawl in the storm drain, invade the porch, creep along the corners, see how anything can grow if it wants to.



graphique: Portfolio 46 | Guilherme Bergamini



graphique: Collages as dialogues about human 06.47.40 | Alexander Chernavskiy

5

imaginação

Anatomist | Couri Johnson

After the earthquake, she goes out collecting bones. It's easy enough. The ground of the graveyard has been split open, caving in near the center in a deep pit, from which several fissures run off in all directions. Like how a child draws a star. Or maybe like an asterisk. One to be tacked onto the sentence Rest in Peace*. (*Unless the dirt decides maybe it's too good for you one day, and spits you back up.) All around the crags, the ground is littered with bits of coffins, femurs, collarbones and jaws. Teeth clustered like cigarette butts outside bars. She pockets these, and can hear them rattle when she walks. Every now and then she slips a hand in and runs them through her fingers. The rest she gathers on a blanket and rolls up to carry fireman-style over her shoulder. She can only carry so many at a time, but she doesn't mind. It's good to get out of the house. It's good to have a hobby. Her tapes say so.

Once she steps too close to the edge of the pit and looks down. It goes deep. Deep-deep. So deep the darkness seems to take on mass. The dark looks solid enough to crawl out of the hole. To maybe say something. To maybe speak her name.

"Hello?" she says, and her voice bounces off its dirt walls before being muffled into nothing. She waits a moment, bent at the waist with an ear cocked towards the pit, but it doesn't reply. She sucks all her saliva to the back of her throat and hawks a logy into it.

The boy had hated stuff like that. Like when she had tried to spit into the mouth of a bass in a river below. Gross, he called it.

She feels embarrassed but misconstrues it for pride.

"It's rude not to respond," she tells the pit. She gathers her bones in her arms and picks her way between the fissures, out of the graveyard.

#

The FEMA man said that the building she lives in is mostly undamaged. That's subjective, she thinks. Part of the earth underneath the foundation crumbled so it sits at a slant. The same goes for the identical apartment building next to it. They've slumped together, their roves resting against each other's roves like twin sisters dozing off in the back of a car. She had always wanted a twin. She thought a twin would come with a built-in, permanent bond, and maybe telepathic powers. She may have thought the snuggling apartments were cute in their sleepy togetherness. She may have envied them. But it put her

floor at such an angle that she couldn't keep anything still without nailing boards down for her furniture to catch on, so instead she's mostly just annoyed.

The FEMA man had told her about the boards, and showed her how to set them up by doing it for her coffee table. He left her a few nails, a hammer because she didn't have one, and some wood. Like the rest of her things, they had slid against the wall in a heap.

That was all they could do for now, the FEMA man said. There was greater need all throughout the city. After things like this, hurt becomes quantifiable. Not all hurts are equal, or deserving of attention.

So she and the graveyard remain distressed.

Although to be honest, things aren't that different from before. She was never great at housekeeping. Only now her clutter is all in one place, and there are three near-complete skeletons on her couch.

Her front window is also broken, but she'd done that before the earthquake.

When she comes in she lays the blanket across the skeletons' legs. Only the middle one has both, and it's in want of a foot and an arm. Every time she comes home they tell her what they're in need off.

"Did you bring me a clavicle?" Says the one.

"A tibia?" Says the second.

"If I had fingers, I could play the most beautiful melodies for you. Just get me a piano, and some phalanges." Says the one again.

She has heard such promises before. The third one, her newest, doesn't say anything. He doesn't have the mandibles. He just stares at her with his sockets like the pit. But she knows this isn't his fault.

She loots her phone out of the clutter on the wall and checks it, but there's nothing from anyone she knows. Just strangers on apps trying to reach out to other strangers. Mostly for nudes, she thinks. She sets it back down, and it slides into the clutter. She lets it go. Don't let technology rule you. That's what one of her tapes said.

Next she searches out her player, the one she bought from a thrift store before the quake, a book on anatomy she found in the ruins of the library, and her box of tapes. The last is the easiest to find. She always tucks it under the cushions of her couch. Sometimes it shifts around if the skeletons have squirmed while she was gone. But they never do that much.

Back before the quake, and back before the broken window, when the boy used to lay with her on the couch, the tapes used to move a lot more. Sometimes the box would even open and all the tapes would spill out and she'd have to fish them out of the bottom of the couch one by one.

Always count things that could be worse, or once were worse, or even just different. Count what you can. Keep track of the quantities of your life. Run a tally.

That came from a tape, and the tapes had come from the old man upstairs, who liked to record himself reading self-help books. He left them outside his neighbor's doors. She kept them. She'd seen him looting through the dumpster and retrieving the ones chucked away. She felt sorry for him. And she also thought she could use some guidance. Now, they're the last two left in the building. Everyone else had somewhere else to go.

She has twenty-two tapes in total. She's never spoken to the man, but she knows his voice better than she knows her own father's, possibly even better than she knows her own. It's a road-rash voice. One that gets stuck in the ear and stays there. Every now and then it floats through her mind when she's out doing other things. She prefers this to when the boy's voice creeps in. His is only ever critical.

It was the old man's voice that had given her the idea about the bones. She had been walking past the graveyard on her way to where FEMA had set up its headquarters. The man with the boards had told her to register her name as a survivor down there, and that's what she was going to do. She wasn't, she told herself, going to check for the boy's name. She was just going to announce to the world that she was still here. Though no one yet had called asking. She'd gotten one message from a woman she didn't know yet asking if she was alive. They were supposed to have coffee later that month. She didn't reply.

Care makes us human, the old man's voice told her. Care is the cornerstone of civilization. Without it, we degrade into wildness. Without it, we dissolve into nothing. Care is what makes us real.

All around, the houses were split in twos or threes or crumbled into nothing, fissures of broken concrete and grass stretching to their porches and reaching down into their foundations to shake them apart. Like tentacles from some Sci-Fi flick. The whole city had gone Lovecraft. Not even suburbia had survived. Fences and pink flamingos were tossed aside or swallowed. Across the road the brick and wrought iron fence that had caged in the graveyard had crumbled and twisted like used tissue. A skull had bounced all the way out of bounds and onto the sidewalk. And did she care? Was she cared for?

We must find people who care. We must make people care. To make us real. Or else, we're nothing.

She knew make wasn't meant literally, but she also didn't see why it couldn't be. It seemed simpler than the alternative. Easier, in the long run. And so instead of going down to register as a survivor, she climbed the rubble of the fence into the graveyard.

#

That advice had come from a tape titled *Becoming a Real Person*, the most recent tape the old man had given to her. It's the one in her tape deck now, and so far she thinks it's the best out of all of them. Before this her favorite had been *How to Keep your Face Still When you Need to*. She'd listened to that one often back before the quake, when she had a job to go to and there were people in the streets. But now it isn't so important. She lets her face do what it wants.

She hits play and it starts mid-sentence:

"without others' hands and eyes. How can you know you are flesh if there is no one there to touch you? To verify that this skin is here. This body is here. How can you be sure you can be seen, if there are no eyes to see you?"

She opens up the blanket and starts detangling the bones. The skeletons lean their heads forward to see what she's brought home.

"Have you ever wondered if these are real books?" asks the second skeleton.

She doesn't say anything back. She picks up a skull and runs her hands over it to brush the dirt off. Then she opens the anatomy book to the page about heads, necks, and shoulders.

"No," groans the first. "You promised you wouldn't start another."

The jawless skeleton's head rattles side to side to side until she reaches up and touches his empty knee socket.

"I'll see what I have for all of you," she says. "But look at this poor guy. His need is so great. He's got nothing." She holds the skull up so they can see into its eyes, and they quiet down.

Really, she knows once she gives them everything they need only one of two things can happen. Either they'll leave. Or they'll want something more. Maybe their real teeth.

Their real bones. Their real selves. Their real families. Things she can't give them. Which will just boil down to them leaving as well, but after giving her much more of a headache.

She didn't need the tapes to tell her that.

"You will never be a real person until someone tells you you are a real person. Until then you are nothing more than dust motes. You are nothing more than an accidental cluster of atoms. A photograph only partially developed."

She pulls a bone out of the pile and looks from it to the book. She had never studied anatomy. Her two years in college had been wasted on pursuing a degree in fine arts with a focus on pottery. Back then she had studied bodies in a casual, romantic way, but she had never really known any of them for long. The only body she had ever really known was her own, and can one really accurately know one's body? And then she knew the boy's body, for a while. She knew the curve of his ribs, the bend of his elbow, the click of his jaw. She had become a specialist in his anatomy. She knew when his spine curved a certain way and his fingers spread, she was becoming his world. She knew when his teeth clenched and shoulders hunched, bad weather was rolling in. She could still conjure pictures of his body behind her eyes.

She sets the skull between the knees of one of the skeletons. "Hold him still," she says. She gathers what looks to be scattered bits of spine. They aren't exactly the same size, but they will do. She uncaps her glue and turns to the skull.

#

The tape finishes, and she flips it and starts it again. The first skeleton groans, but the others stay quiet. She takes a break every now and then to check her phone. Sometimes she pulls up the news. There's warnings about after-shocks. The list of survivors has been published without her. She doesn't look. There's footage of buildings downtown collapsing in on themselves as the camera filming it shakes. There's footage of people crying. People sitting on the ground, dazed and dirt spackled, under long pavilion styled tents. There is a moment where she catches sight of a survivor and nearly recognizes him as him. It's hard to know for sure, because it's only someone in the background. It's only someone who is dust covered moving with purpose towards someone else, their face only partially caught by the camera. It is only just a glimpse, and whenever she catches glimpses of someone who looks enough like him, she is always recognizing them as him. It means nothing.

She rewinds it anyway to watch one more time. And then again.

"He's dry now," the one calls from the couch.

She sets her phone down and it slides back into the clutter. The newest skeleton is just a spine, shoulder blades, and an arm. She'll bring him ribs if she can find them tomorrow. Tomorrow, he'll be awake. For now, she props him up against the end of the couch so his arm dangles over the arm rest.

She works on the others, filling in their gaps. She gives the third the rest of an arm, a piece of pelvis, finishes one of his legs down to his foot. The first gets all the fingers. The second gets a foot and some toes. She works until after midnight and all that's left in the blanket are bits of bone shard so fine they look like sugar.

She stands up and wraps the blanket around herself like a cape and then drops down between the third skeleton and the newest one. The third skeleton turns his face towards her, his skull bouncing on the base of his spine. She reaches up to touch his cheekbone.

"Tomorrow I'll find you a jaw," she promises.

#

She wakes to a thump on her door sometime past ten. She untangles herself from the blanket and the bones. The morning is always the worst. Dew slips in the broken window and soaks the clutter against the wall and the top of the couch. It even gets in her hair and wets the top of the skeletons' skulls. Their teeth rattle in their sleep from the cold. But there isn't enough space in her bed for all of them. It's also the hardest to fight against the tilt of her floor in the mornings. She keeps forgetting the shape of the world in her sleep, and the first steps of the day are always surprising.

At the door, lying on her mat, is a tape. The front door of her building is hanging open and outside she hears a car door slam. Voices bickering. She steps out into the hall and looks out. At the curb there's a station wagon idling, and a man and woman talking over the roof. In the backseat the old man from upstairs sits. In the hatch are a few suitcases and filled trash bags. The woman lowers herself into the car, and the man looks back once at the apartment building. He sees her standing there, and gives her a strained smile before dropping into the car as well.

The old man doesn't look at all before the car pulls off.

She walks out the door and stands at the curb. She can still smell the smog from their exhaust pipe. She looks down the road and watches as the car rocks over a make shift bridge of boards stretched over a fissure in the ground. She wants to stand there and watch them until they're out of sight, but with the road the way it is, it's slow going. The fact that they had made it at all is surprising. Its evidence of great care.

She feels grief and misconstrues it as anger.

She turns around and walks back into her apartment, leaving the tape on the mat.

“Are you going to the graveyard?” The one asks, but she walks past them and closes herself up in the bathroom. She sits on the toilet and hangs her head between her knees and counts her toes.

Without another person to witness your life, does your life mean anything at all?

It's too much for me to handle on my own, the boy says. I can't be the one to take care of you.

She closes her eyes and can see the haze of station wagon exhaust. The old man’s face smeared behind tinted glass. The woman and the man sitting together upfront, having a small argument.

She feels jealousy and misconstrues it as betrayal.

She lets herself sit with that misunderstanding until she dozes off.

#

There is a scratching at the bathroom door. She wakes to it. She thinks about letting it be, but as if the sound can read her mind, it grows more frantic. She thinks of gouges in the wood. She wonders if her landlord is dead.

When she opens the door, it’s her favorite laying outside. His arm is outstretched and the hand is still flapping up and down on its wrist. He stares up at her.

She gathers him up in her arms and carries him back to the couch.

“You can’t let us keep living like this,” says the second. “Being incomplete is torture.”

The fourth is still asleep. She can see pearls of glue that have oozed out between the seams of his spine. When he wakes, will he wake disoriented? That’s how it was with the others. All of them came to screaming. Except for the third. She had seen to that when she cracked his jaw off in the cemetery.

She feels empathy but misconstrues it as pity.

“Okay,” she says. “Fine.”

#

She takes three shopping carts from the ruined dollar store down the road. She'll need some kind of rope to be as efficient as possible, and she'll need more glue from inside. The store has been caved in completely. Its roof lays on top of its remains like a stone tablet cracked in two. She has to pull out stone after stone before she can squeeze under it and crawl through the remains of the store's guts.

When she's inside, there's only just enough light to make out the vague shape of things in the dark. Bits of plastic toys dig into the palms of her hands. She feels her way through puddles of water and soda. Feels wet stuffing between her fingers. She remembers a story she was told as a child. About a stuffed rabbit that wanted to be made real. *Care is key.*

The old man should not have acted like he was lonely if he was not alone.

She presses forward, feeling her way through the half-light. She hits a wall of rubble. Follows it to the right, and her hand lands in something wet again. When she reaches forward she feels soft flesh and the edge of cloth. She stares down at where she knows her hand to be until the darkness takes the shape of an arm sprouting out of a polo shirt. A torso with a name tag she can't read.

She wonders for the first time what she'll do when the world rights itself. When the people who can go back to living finally do go back to living. The world will shake off the dust and march on, and those who can't march along will go back in the dirt. They'll dissolve into phantoms.

She holds the hand of the corpse. She feels fear and misconstrues it as grief.

The building shakes. Beneath her the earth bucks. She lets go of the corpse's hand and curls into a ball. The aftershock passes.

"Sorry," she says, and crawls over the body. She keeps crawling, and keeps searching until her hands brush against yarn, soft and unspooled and just strong enough to handle what she needs of it.

#

She pulls the train of carts she tied together into the graveyard. She is covered head to toe in dollar store dust. It's in her eyes, causing the light to sparkle and pop like there are fairies floating all around her. It's in her mouth, making everything taste like plaster and mold. It is on her skin, dying her white as a plastic bag. She feels closer to the bones than ever before.

She begins to load the carts, picking bones indiscriminately. Her choices have always been uneducated, but she had looked, at least, before. Tried to imagine which parts might fit where. Now she just brings arm loads to the shopping carts and dumps them in, one after the other. When her arms are empty she runs through the graveyard till they're full again. Already, the sun is setting. She'd been under the rubble for longer than she thought.

She comes to the mouth of the pit when all but the last cart are completely full, and she looks down into it. The black of it is seeping up. Reaching out towards her.

There is a nothing inside of all of us. We are nothing, all of us. We need others to act as mirrors. So that we can be vigilante against the parts of ourselves that would eat the rest of us whole, says the old man.

The way you act is irrational, says the boy.

I never know who I'm talking to.

I think I've never really known you at all.

She kicks her foot into the dirt and a clump of it comes loose and falls into the pit, cartwheeling as it goes. It slips from view. She imagines running behind the carts until they pick up enough speed, then jumping on the back. She imagines them all plummeting over the edge and falling together.

“If you have something to say then say it,” she says. But the pit just throbs, and the sun goes down.

#

She props the door to her building open, and pushes the carts up the slanted floor towards her door. When she gets there the tape is gone and the door is ajar. Inside she can hear the old man's voice. She lets go of the carts and they roll back to hit her in the stomach. She buckles for a moment before moving out of the way. The carts roll past her and smash into the wall, scattering bones all over the floor. She ignores this in favor of the door.

Someone, she thinks, has come back. Maybe the old man. Or maybe someone come to see if she's alive. Maybe someone she used to work with. Or maybe even her family. Or maybe even the boy.

As she opens the door she can see him, shoulders hunched over the player in the dark of her apartment. The old man's voice, the new tape, is playing.

“When I was a boy I used to think about colors. How we saw them. How we could never be sure that what we were seeing was like anyone else was seeing. We look at something and call it blue but how can I know that my blue is your blue?”

She steps closer and rubs dollar store out of her eye. “Honey?” She asks, and he turns his head. But there are no eyes. No nose. No body.

“Are you the one who brought me here?” Asks the fourth skeleton.

“How can we know that our reality matches anyone else’s? Language is a trap. It falls short of any true meaning. It is a fool’s comfort. And feelings? We learn the names of our feelings because people tell us what we are feeling when we are feeling it based on what they can see. But how can they truly know what we’re feeling? So then, how can we?”

On the couch the three are asleep. Except maybe the third. She can never tell with the third. Is he watching her? Did he let the fourth touch her things? Did he let him open the door? Did he let him fool her into thinking that there was someone coming for her?

The fourth pushes and pulls himself away from the player towards her. He reaches for her ankle, and she backs away.

“You have to finish me up,” he says. “I can’t stand being this way.”

She feels pity but misconstrues it as revulsion. She kicks his hand away and he rolls down the floor and clatters against the wall.

“I wanted to share with you what I felt and what I saw, but there’s no true way.”

She seizes the skeleton out of the clutter, and hoists him up against the wall. She pounds him against it, over and over. He begins to scream. She begins to scream. Bits of bone splinter. Spine falls to the floor.

“I’m a failure when it comes to being a person. Maybe we all are. I’m sorry.”

Something hard comes down across the top of her skull and her vision becomes all bright bursts of color. She drops the skeleton and they fall together to the floor. She catches sight of the third skeleton, her favorite. His eye sockets are so very close to hers. Then all she can see is nothing.

#

She comes to to the sound of rattling bones and music. She can’t stand up. Her body is bound with unwound tapes. From the floor all she can see is ankle bones, spinning and

stomping and sliding down the angled floor in pairs to stomp back up it together. She rolls onto her back and tries to prop her head up to get a better view, but before she can, hands grip her ankles and drag her across the floor. Then hands are all over her. She wants to scream but there is tape ribbon lodged in her mouth and around her tongue.

The hands hoist her up and hold her steady. In her apartment, there are wall-to-wall skeletons, dancing. In the corner the one stands, playing the piano, while another bangs on her pots and pans. She tries to count how many, and loses track. There are more in the hall. They begin to pour in, and the music grows louder. They form a circle. They spin her around and around and pass her to the next in line. The tape gets caught under her feet sometimes, and she nearly falls, but the next set of hands catches her, lifts her back up, and sets her spinning again.

When she comes full circle they shove her backwards into the middle. She is sure she is falling when she feels hands hook under her shoulders and drag her back up. She's turned around once more. Her favorite is holding her, very nearly complete, but still jawless.

He takes the tape ribbon from out of her mouth and unwinds her slowly. A skeleton steps forward with a jaw and a bottle of glue. Her favorite takes them once she is untied. He holds them out to her.

Once something is finished, it's finished, the boy says. All around her are empty eyes. The music has stopped.

Her favorite presses the jaw into her hand. She can feel the teeth press into her palm. Behind her there is a wall of ribs. She closes her eyes and closes her fingers around the bone. She reaches up to his face and his hands guide her hands to the empty seam.

There is a great cheer, and the music starts up again. When she opens her eyes, they're all filing out of her apartment, new limbs flailing. The third stands before her, wiggling his jaw. He lays a hand on her shoulder and says something, but she can't hear him over the music. Two skeletons pick up the piano, and carry it so the first can keep playing as he walks. The apartment empties. She can hear them in the street through the shattered glass of her window.

Before the last few are gone the third hoists her up and carries her out the door after them.

#

They whirl together down the street. Sometimes they do the foxtrot. Sometimes it's the tango. Sometimes he sends her spinning and she freewheels through the skeletons, crashing into them and nearly falling. She's never sure if it's him that takes her hand again, but it no longer seems important. She catches sight of another parade making their way out of downtown. Trucks branded with FEMA drive slowly up the wreckage of the main road. People trail behind, back packs slung over their shoulders, or jumbled possessions clutched in their arms. For a moment she thinks they're going to merge, but the skeletons veer away. They're heading into the cemetery. She pulls away from the skeletons and watches the survivor procession as it draws closer. The trucks stop in the road when they see the skeletons. The survivors on foot draw alongside them.

Hands spider around her hips and she feels a collarbone press into the back of her neck. Someone lifts her upward, and she allows herself to be lifted. She's hoisted upwards, spread out on her back over the hands of a cluster of skeletons, as if she were crowd surfing through them. Up ahead the leaders have made it to the edge of the pit. She watches the white caps of their head drop down and disappear only to be followed by the next. It looks like a river churning over the brink of a waterfall. The piano goes, and the player after it. The sounds of pots and pans banging is replaced by the quiet murmur of grass under feet and the hum of idling trucks.

She tilts her head back towards the survivors. Everyone looks the same, upside down and far away. Or maybe, everyone looks the same when your heart is hurt and hopeful.

They all look like him.

The earth shakes again and she feels the bones of the many hands holding her start to shake. She looks back and sees the pit widening, clumps of dirt loosening and tumbling under the feet of the skeletons, who follow the earth down into the dark. Still, the ones carrying her surge forward to the opening mouth of it, and she rides along.

All I ever wanted was to be known by someone. To feel one with others, the old man says.

The hands around her ankles let go as the skeletons holding them drop downward. She sits up on the shoulders of the few remaining skeletons to look one last time at the survivors. Is one stepping forward? She thinks, but before she can tell, the skeletons beneath her knees and thighs are gone, and its too late. She turns to the pit, and stares down its dark eye. Then she reaches out her arms, and leans forward.

She hears her name being called.

The Game | Mary Leoson

Fall, 1990

This was it—I was finally going to have something juicy to put in that diary Mom got me for my birthday. No more whining about being the invisible girl. No more sitting out school dances like a loser. No more watching from the sidelines wishing I was part of the action. I thought of my childhood BFF, Beth, who I'd ditched for this opportunity, and a small pang of guilt began to grow in my stomach. But it drowned quickly in the half tub of brownies that sat there like a rock. Chocolate could absorb anything—guilt, fear, shame, loneliness. It was a power I had discovered long ago. I hoped the cravings would subside once I found a boyfriend. If I hung out with the right crowd—the cool girls—the boys would follow. They always did. It was time for me to become somebody.

I sat in the back seat of Marjorie Mason's white jeep, pretending the air streaming through the open roof wasn't too cold. It slapped my face, licking my hair to one side and then the other, as we barreled down the highway at 70 miles an hour. Marjorie was swerving a little, evidence of the wine coolers we'd had before leaving her Parkside mansion, but I wasn't worried. Two weeks ago, I couldn't have imagined being included on this adventure. It was going to be a night filled with magic.

Sandwiched between the bags of alcohol and Chloe Sims, I imagined my body soaking up some of her glamour. My gaze fell on our legs, four teenaged thighs neatly lined up together, but two of these things were not like the others. Chloe's long, thin legs looked sleek in tight stirrup pants. Their remarkable length was what had won her a modeling contract in the Sears catalog.

My eyes fell on my own shorter, wider thighs, hiding beneath baggy Girbaud jeans. The ends had been French cuffed, but earlier Marjorie had looked me up and down, demanded an immediate change if she "were to be seen with me" tonight. I'd complied before she'd finished the sentence. Her eyes fell on me now, a reflection in the rear-view mirror, her large brown eyes lined with black like an Egyptian princess. They turned up as she smiled, but looked more mischievous than friendly. As her gaze returned to the road, her blonde hair whipped back and forth in the wind, like a horse's mane.

Kristen Grant, who rode shotgun, turned around then, stared at me openly. All these girls were intimidating, but she was the only one who really scared me. Her naturally ebony hair had been dyed even darker—a blue black that made her white skin pallid. Her lips were coated in thick red, her murky gray eyes haunting and bare. A cigarette dangled from her hand; she held it low so the wind wouldn't sweep it away. She cocked her head to the side, watching me. I attempted a smile, but she didn't match it. As she drew the cigarette closer to my knee, her eyes remained locked on my face.

"Kristen!" said Chloe beside me, putting up her hands in a "stop" motion.

Drawing the glowing tip away from me, she looked up, raised one eyebrow. "What?"

"That's not necessary," replied Chloe, raising her voice above the wind.

"I just wanted to see how far she was willing to go."

A shiver ran through my body as Kristen turned back around, and for the first time that night, I started to wonder why they'd brought me along if she didn't approve. And clearly she didn't. I could almost see the steam coming off her, angry at Chloe's intervention. It was not in line with the group's pecking order. Like a pack of wild dogs, every group had their Alpha and Beta. Marjorie was the Alpha. She drove the car. She called the shots. She had final say. But Kristen was the Beta, second only to Marjorie, and she had probably fought for that position. It was an unspoken rule that teenage girls just knew, even if they didn't have labels. Never fuck with the head bitches in charge unless you want their wrath.

As if she could sense my anxiety, Chloe smiled reassuringly, her green eyes alluring and gentle. Even after she looked away, returned her gaze to the window and the world that flashed by, I examined her profile. Her pink lips were glossed and rested in a seductive pout that I had tried to mimic in the mirror at home. I imagined how it might feel to pose for the camera, tossing a doe-eyed glance toward the shutter, peeking out from beneath shaggy auburn bangs. I fantasized about waking up in the morning in a body that was lithe and graceful, with no roll that paunched out when I laid on my side.

She made a joke about Marjorie weaving into the other lane and we all chuckled. Even Chloe's laughter sounded like bells in comparison to my awkward guffaw. Her elegance was effortless. I wore awkwardness like a backpack I could never take off—a turtle shell into which I crawled several times a day. Maybe if I hung out with these girls more, the popular crowd, I would absorb some of their confidence. Maybe they could extract me from the reptilian casing.

Feeling eyes on me, I glanced up at the rearview mirror again, where I found Marjorie's black-lined irises examining me under a microscope. They flicked to the road, then back to me, dangerously playful. "So, Molly, I'm curious, just how far would you go to be one of us?"

The question hung in the air like a guillotine, ready to slice off my head. Kristen peered around the shotgun seat, tossed Chloe a glare like darts. Speech eluded me. I didn't know what to say because I wasn't sure myself.

"I don't know." It escaped my mouth before I gave it permission. As soon as the words left, I wanted to cram them back in, but they were no longer mine. They had become group property.

"You don't know?" Marjorie sang back to me, sweetly but not sincerely. "Then why are we wasting our time with you?"

"You're not," I spat quickly. "I'll do whatever it takes." My newfound courage was more than an answer; it was a declaration, even to myself. After all, what could they ask me to do that would be that bad?

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The four of us stood in darkness at the gates of the old abandoned amusement park, its signs battered, worn, faded from sunlight and too many winters of neglect. Weeds grew up from cracks in the cement that had once been a clean path to joy. I could almost hear children's laughter, smell cotton candy and elephant ears, feel the excitement that always built in my stomach the night before a trip to ride rollercoasters. I'd never been to a defunct park before. There was something crushing about standing at its lonely ticket booth, the turnstile frozen in time.

We stood side by side, staring into the ghost town bathed in moonlight. I turned my head, peered down the row of silhouettes, not sure what to expect. Marjorie turned suddenly, stepped before us as if she was on a stage.

"Ladies, our adventure begins here," she said, sweeping her long blonde hair to the side. "Prepare yourselves for a quest that will surpass all those that have come before."

In silence, we followed her—pecking order clear. Marjorie led us through the jungle of broken rides, athletic like a lynx, nimble among the rusting metal that surrounded us. She stopped to aim a ball at a clown's wooden mouth in the shape of an 'o', hit her target effortlessly. Dancing to music only she could hear, she looked at me triumphantly, shook off

her victory like it was nothing. Kristen was right behind, leaving a trail of cigarette ash past the decrepit joker faces that stared down on us like gargoyles. Chloe was next, eyeing the frozen merry-go-round, her breath escaping plump lips in smoke. And then there was me, unsure of my steps, creped out by darkness, bringing up the tail. They wouldn't even notice if I got lost.

We wove through the aging trail, the ghosts of rollercoasters rushing past, the echoes of thrilled screams breathing over our shoulders. The breeze picked up as we passed the swing ride, the empty seats creaking on their chains. The buckets on the ferris wheel hung still, the giant teacups no longer spun, the water for the log rides had long dried up.

Marjorie brought us to a stop at the Big Hill, a wooden rollercoaster known for its initial high drop-off and series of smaller hills that gave kids the belly-flops, once upon a time.

"Here we are," she said, sweeping her hand across the scene as if to introduce it. "The game tonight, ladies, is drunk coaster climbing."

"That's badass," said Kristen. "I should know, it was my idea." She looked at the rest of us as if we were her subjects, her shadowy hair like a cowl around her pale face.

"Our idea," said Marjorie, irritated. She spat the words at Kristen like poison. "I brought you here, remember?"

"Course, Marj—our idea," Kristen shrugged, but lifted her red lip in a mock growl when Marjorie turned her back.

"The flavor of the evening," continued Marjorie, as she pulled a bottle out of her backpack, "is peppermint schnapps."

"Wait, but—" began Chloe, twisting her frosted auburn hair nervously. She let go and the curl sprang back into its coiled place.

"But nothing." Marjorie cut her off, glared at her. "It's not my problem that you got so drunk off this at that frat party that you puked your guts up. Suck it up, Chloe. Or have you lost your edge?"

Chloe swallowed hard. Her glossed lips pursed, relaxed into a smile. "The mintier the better," she replied.

Marjorie was appeased. "That's what I like to hear."

Kristen's eyes fell on me. "What about that one?" she said to Marjorie, who shrugged. "She can stay if she can keep up."

Peppermint schnapps. I think I'd stolen a sip or two from my mother's hot chocolate spiked with the stuff, but had never had it straight from the bottle. This was do or die. "No problem," I said, even convincing myself. The first sip was the worst. The liquid burned as it went down my throat, leaving a trail of mint that seeped up through my nose.

"Tell us something interesting about *you*, Molly," said Marjorie, lighting up a cigarette that she took from Kristen's pack. She didn't bother to ask permission.

"Yeah, we don't keep secrets in this group," said Chloe.

"We just keep them from everyone else," added Kristen.

My mind swam. *Something interesting, something interesting...* "I can tie a cherry stem in a knot with my tongue," I offered.

"The guys will love that," said Chloe.

"You'll need a make-over," said Marjorie, "If you're going to hang with us."

"A major one," whispered Kristen under her breath.

"I'll do it," offered Chloe, whose eyes flicked to mine. "I mean, if you want me to."

"I want you to." Marjorie rolled her eyes. "Like, tomorrow."

I could feel the blood rushing to my face and was glad for the darkness. Drink. Drink. Drink. Yes, a make-over sounded great. I wondered if Chloe had a magic wand that could make me thinner, taller—better.

The bottle was now half way gone and I felt like I was floating. I looked at Chloe beside me, who had grown very quiet. I imagined she was choking down nausea. I hoped I wasn't too close behind her.

"Oh, my god, this girl's actually funny," Kristen said, moving toward me. She put her hand on my knee like an initiation. I couldn't even remember what I'd said, but everyone else loved it. I was *in*.

When I stood up, the world moved. Chloe grabbed one of my arms, steadying me. We were going to do this together.

“Drunk coaster climbing!” yelled Kristen. Her voice echoed through the empty park, bouncing off the abandoned mineshaft ride and crumbling bumper car stadium.

“Woohoo!” we screamed, our voices blending.

The roller coaster track stretched upward like a curvy ladder, the steps further apart the closer we got to them. We scaled one of the larger mountains carefully, pecking order preserved. We were like ants on the back of a dragon, reaching towards its angry head. The moon hung above us, a spotlight on a dark blanket. If only the rest of the school could see me now. I was one of them. I was flying high.

My legs began to burn about a third of the way up—20 feet, I guessed. It was about that time that a curious smell filled my nose. It was familiar—the smell of backyard barbeques. Lighter fluid? Pushing the thought aside, I put more stress on my arms, using them to pull myself up, cursing my extra weight with each step. My hips felt like a heavy weight tugging me down, and when I looked back, the ground spun. Don’t look down. My stomach lurched but I swallowed the bile at the back of my throat.

“Molly! Truth or dare?” yelled Marjorie. Her voice crawled down the ladder toward me. I loved hearing her say my name. I was her friend now.

“Truth!” I yelled back, clutched the next ladder rung in my hand, pulled myself up.

“Have you lost your V-card yet?”

“No lies!” yelled Kristen. “Remember, we keep the secrets between us.”

I swallowed, climbed. “No!” I waited for the judgement, but it never came. I pushed on up the ladder, ignored my burning muscles, tucked away thoughts of doubt and embarrassment.

“We’ll have to fix that,” responded Chloe, laughing into the night air. I laughed, too, even though the thought intimidated me.

“Your turn, Molly!” shouted Kristen. “You ask!”

Next rung up. The others were moving faster than me. I picked up the pace. “Chloe, truth or dare?” I shouted.

“Truth!”

What would impress them? What could I ask? “Is your boyfriend as good in the sack as everyone says?”

“Yes,” she yelled back, giggling and gasping for breath. She pulled herself up onto the ledge. She peered down at me, her eyes widened, probably from taking in the height. I was afraid to look back again, so I stayed focused on her. I was there—I was one of them! I tossed my fear aside, pulled myself up the final rung onto the landing.

“Wow, this is a serious view,” Chloe said. I followed her gaze, out over the sprawling cemetery before us. As far as I could see, there were obsolete rides, worn out toys whose skeletal bodies stood frozen, decaying slowly in the weather. They glowed in the moonlight, their stillness unsettling. Something groaned among the corpses, the objection disappearing into the wind.

“Your turn, Chloe,” said Kristen, poking her in the arm.

Chloe licked her lips, paused. “Marjorie, truth or dare?”

Marjorie turned to face us, something dangerous in her eyes. “Dare.”

Chloe was caught off guard. “Well, we’re already drunk climbing a roller coaster, so, I don’t know if I can top that.” She thought, put her finger to her lips, looked around. “I dare you to jump to that ledge.” She was desperate—the next ledge was pretty far. She reconsidered. “But if you don’t want to, it’s ok, we’ll just do a truth.”

“No, no,” said Marjorie. “This girl never turns down a dare.” She stared at the distance between the two platforms, one for the hill we were on, the other made for a coaster going in the opposite direction. Maybe they were there for maintenance, maybe just for emergencies—if a car ever got stuck mid-ride.

“Marjie, I only said it as a joke,” said Chloe, nervously. “There’s no way that’s a good idea.”

“Puh-lease,” she said. “Are you saying I can’t do it?”

“No, I’m saying you *shouldn’t* do it.” Chloe’s eyes grew wider and I could feel my own mirror hers. The nerves tickled my stomach, teased the contents that sloshed back and forth inside me.

“Who are you, my mom? Just shut up and move back.”

Kristen stepped forward, “Hey, Marj, no one doubts you can do it. But maybe it’s not a good idea since you’ve been drinking.”

Marjorie put up her hand and made a hissing noise. “Shhhhhh. Shut it.” The girls fell silent. I held my breath, looked down along the ladder we had climbed. My head spun. We were up three, four stories, maybe higher.

Marjorie moved to the edge of the platform, leaned against the railing, took a running start, leapt toward the other ledge. My breath caught in my throat. Her blond hair trailed after her like a cape. She was supergirl. She landed hard, collapsed onto her side, finally safe. She released a triumphant scream that wound through the park like a banshee.

With a sigh of relief, I sat down on the platform. My stomach threatened to explode.

“I can’t believe you just fucking did that,” said Chloe. She plopped down next to me and I felt power in her company. I put my hand on her back, comforting her. She leaned in, put her head on my shoulder. This was what friends did, supported each other.

Marjorie grinned, her white teeth reflecting the moonlight. “I know, right? I’m so impressive.” She slowly outstretched her arm, pointed at Kristen. “Ok, girlfriend, don’t let me down. Kristen, truth or dare? Don’t you fucking say truth.”

Kristen raised her head high, hovered above Marjorie’s challenge. “Dare,” she hissed. I couldn’t tell if she was pissed or enthralled.

“Join me,” said Marjorie, sweetly, cocking her head to one side like a golden retriever. With her pointer finger, she made a “come hither” gesture.

I closed my eyes, the anxiety rising in my bones. My teeth started to chatter. This was getting to be too much. This was... stupid.

“Kristen, don’t do it,” said Chloe, looking up at her. She reached out for Kristen’s hand, who just shook off the attempt. “Back off, bitches, I’m up for it.”

“Oh my god,” Chloe murmured, buried her head in my shoulder even further.

Kristen backed up, following Marjorie’s lead. With three steps as a running start, she dove, shrieked as she leapt toward the other ledge. Her feet touched down, but only partially on the platform. She wobbled backwards, waved her arms around in panic to catch her balance.

I froze, gasped. Chloe screamed. And Marjorie grabbed her sleeve, ripping her black leather jacket, but it was enough to sway her forward. She crumpled to her knees, clumsily.

“Holy shit,” Kristen muttered. “Holy shit!” she screamed, her eyes as wide around as the clown’s on the tattered billboard behind her.

“You’ve only got eight more lives left, sister,” said Marjorie, coolly. They slapped hands, giving five. “You’re the only one badass enough to follow my lead.”

“Or stupid enough,” mumbled Chloe, under her breath. I looked up to see if anyone else had heard.

“What was that, Chloe?” said Marjorie, her head cocked to one side. “You got somethin’ to say?”

“Yeah, I think we should get down,” Chloe responded, pulling her head upright, not backing down from Marjorie’s glare.

“Oh, yeah? Well we’re not done. Or are you just trying to hold onto secrets?”

The question hung in the air and I felt Chloe stiffen next to me.

“Truth or dare?” Marjorie’s blonde hair reflected the moonlight eerily, hay on a scarecrow’s head.

Chloe rolled her eyes in annoyance, but I could see it was disguising something else... fear? “It’s not your turn, Marjorie, it’s Kristen’s,” she said.

“Yeah, well, I just saved her life so she owes me one.” Marjorie was amped up. Maybe it was the adrenaline rush from the jump. “So? Truth or dare?”

Chloe shook her head, shrugged. “Truth.”

“Did you or did you not sleep with my boyfriend?” Marjorie’s question flew from one ledge to the other, knocked the wind out of Chloe. I could see it on her face, felt her body begin to shake next to me. “Wish ya woulda picked dare, huh?” The sweet tone was a lure.

Chloe stared back at her dumbly. “I don’t...” she started, but her voice trailed off. Her green eyes were round like a puppy’s, sweet to a fault. She glanced at me, her lip quivering in surrender to the inquisition.

“It’s ok, it’s not really a question,” said Kristen. “We already know you’re a whore who sleeps with other peoples’ boyfriends.”

I was afraid to move, caught in the spell that was unfolding around me. I could see the tears forming in Chloe’s eyes as they searched for answers in the night air.

“So, you can’t even answer a simple question,” said Marjorie, her words spreading the sweet butter, making room for the knives. “I guess that makes you stupid, too.”

“Marj—.” Chloe started to speak but Marjorie would have none of it. The time for a confession had come and gone, if that was ever what she was after.

“Shut up. I don’t want to hear the sound of your voice.”

Chloe shook her head, her auburn bangs like fringe around her cupid face. “How did you—“

“I said, shut up!” Marjorie yelled. “Or do I have to spell it out for you?” She turned to Kristen. “God, how have we put up with this idiocy for so long?”

Kristen just shook her head, looked down her nose, across the synapse at the girl beside me. I was invisible.

“So, you can’t deal with ‘truth’, let’s see about ‘dare’.” Marjorie and Kristen locked eyes, their mouths twisted up into grins—two jokers in a deck of cards.

“They’re pretty hot over there on that platform, aren’t they, Marjie?” Kristen drew out her words and they dripped with sarcasm.

“So hot.” Marjorie pulled a zippo out of her pocket, played with the top, back and forth, back and forth. “The name of the game tonight, ladies, is drunk coaster climbing. *Hot*, drunk coaster climbing. Your challenge is to make it to the ground before I light this bitch on fire down there.”

My heart leapt, started pounding in my chest. “Is this real?” I whispered. “This is a joke, right?” I looked at Chloe, whose eyes were now leaking tears. She just looked back at Marjorie in disbelief. “Cut it out, Marjie,” she said. “You’re scaring Molly.”

“Who? Oh, yeah, the fat tagalong.” She huffed, dismissing the idea of me entirely. “Well, you know we had to have a reason to come out here, so she’s really just an unfortunate casualty,” she responded, perched on the landing like a crow, teasing the space between us like she owned it. Like she owned us.

“This is boring me, Marjie,” said Kristen, examining her fingernails. They were black shellac in the misty night. “Can we get on with it already?”

Marjorie shrugged, nodded. “Sure, sorry.” She transformed from angelic deity into vengeful hag, pointed at Chloe. “You’re a bitch and a whore.” Her finger moved to the side,

rested on me. “And you’re a nobody, so no one will miss you anyway.” Her body leaned back toward Kristen, her voice softened. “Better?”

“Fabulous,” Kristen growled, looked at us out of the corner of her eye. “Ready, set, go.”

Like cats, Marjorie and Kristen jumped into action. They began scrambling down their side of the coaster, which was already a little closer to the ground. My body was in motion before my mind could catch up. Before I knew it, I was racing back down the coaster the way I had come up. Chloe followed my lead, the threat of dissolving into a burning pyre shoving us into partial sobriety. Either Marjorie had a warped sense of humor or she really planned to burn us to the ground. She had called me a nobody—said no one would miss me. She was a *bitch*.

My body shook. Legs reached for the next step, hands clutched tightly to the rung above. My heart was a drum in my chest, nausea rose from my stomach in waves. Leg, other leg. Hand, other hand. Faster and faster I climbed downward. My eyes flicked from the rollercoaster under me to the shadows that crept down the other hill. They were ahead of us, but not by much.

I was half way down when I heard the crack, followed by a scream. My eyes flew to the other hill, where I saw blonde hair weaving back and forth in the moonlight, legs dangling from a broken step.

“Help!” she screamed. “Kristen!”

“Oh, my god, Marjorie!” Kristen’s voice wove through the massive coaster frame, between support beams, right to my ears. “Hold on, I’m coming!”

I faltered as a gust of wind pushed my body away from the coaster. Chloe gasped above me as the structure creaked. The dragon was trying to shake us loose and it hadn’t yet started to breathe fire. I hugged the wooden frame tight, preferring bruises to the broken bones that would come with letting go. Gulping, I refocused and resumed the descent. My breaths were short gasps, anxious and tight. I tried to block out Marjorie’s shrieks that were becoming more desperate. I was suddenly aware of the aging wood that supported me—supported all of us. We were intruding on a burial ground and it hadn’t occurred to us that there might be a price for trespassing.

My feet hit the ground with a thud and so did Marjorie’s body.

Nocturne, Op. 55: No. 1 in F Minor | Natasha Levinski

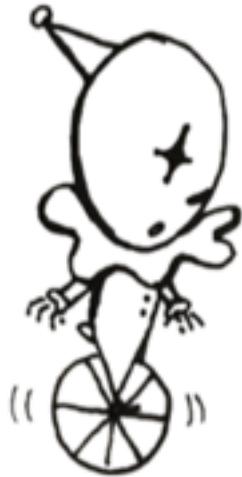


Cold, blue mornings. Winter air whistled through the window's faulty jamb liner. The sun wasn't up, and my alarm hadn't gone off. I was surprised I was alive that early. But I was caught thinking, lucidly dreaming. The silence of the empty passenger pillow was too loud. The mere presence of its viscous white casing was enough to pull me out of the sheets of sleep.

Percolating beans, chilling toothpaste against warm teeth. I was sure no one else was awake. I distracted myself with every task: frying eggs, scrubbing bristles against old oil, suds soaking into my thirsty skin. It felt as though I had forgotten how to live on my own. Was I doing well? I used to think I was better off alone.

It was post-Halloween. All Saints day. Fifty percent off fun-sized candy. Sugar highs were crashing. Bloody Marys cured hangovers. Jack-o'-lanterns with their decaying faces were callously tossed into waste bins where they'd develop mold, attract rodents and then turn into black soft disks. It was "I'm too lazy to take down the decorations" time. It was also "I better put up the Christmas lights" time. Stores were starting to promote the new season. But the date was the only thing that had changed. I was waiting to make a mark on the calendar, to cross off yesterday, count the notches in the wall. I was waiting on a text that I knew would never come.

You said you'd be back post-Halloween and I was starting to think about disconnecting my head from my neck because maybe that would stop the stress, turmoil, and the disintegration of feelings. But there was an awareness growing as the wind caught my hair. It was just me walking in the November rain, singing no tune, just thinking I should have heard from you by now.



Every time I set foot in the grand entry hall of the Drawn & Quarterly Publishing House, with its overarching skylight and white marble floors, I felt an overwhelming sense that I didn't deserve it. Everyone in the building had briefcases, perfect skin, and knew which direction the building was facing (west). It didn't help that it was in the Distillery District which always made me feel much younger and less successful than its residents.

The second floor of the building had a large room of long tables where other cartoonists would come and work. Vivienne was somewhere in the building and if she saw me she would remind me that I had already missed my deadline, and the extended deadline, and then proceed to ask if I had any intentions of writing another comic again. But once I had sat down at a maple-wood table with an off-white sheet of dimpled watercolour paper in front of me, I was reminded of the alkaline taste of white face paint. The way that face paint would clot and drip down with sweet sweat like blots of ink. I rubbed my fingers against the rough paper, hoping it would bring me back.

A group of other artists gathered at the end of the room casting worrisome stares. Their eyes looked sick and yellow as they glanced around the shielded desks and above the rotting spines of archival books. I caught Becca as she quickly glanced away, looking at her phone as though a very important message had popped up. We used to be friends, talking about collaborating, sending each other early drafts. We had even lived together before my sudden six months stay in Montreal which had dissolved our lease and our friendship simultaneously. Now we avoided each other. All the artists knew about you but refused to say anything, incapable of consoling me. What was there to console if nothing had happened? There was no use in shedding tears when there was no body or proof or letter.

Where there was no trace in the present, I found it in my work. My body hunched over books about monsters and folklore, anatomy drawings from early medical journals, and

casefiles from before the invention of DNA research. In these books, I found relief in the fact that no truth lay in cold cases, in the ambiguity of history, in contradictory primary sources. There's something life-like about never finding an answer.

Marie took a seat on the desk beside me. Her hair was curled and she wore a stone necklace with 'love' carved into it.

"Hey," She said, "Moranna?"

And after a moment I responded, "Hi."

"How's it going?"

I gave her a look that clearly said, 'not okay', but Marie never noticed anything except for continuity errors and misplaced semicolons.

"I saw Vivienne in the hallway the other day."

"Really? What a strange coincidence being that you work for her."

She didn't laugh. "She said how excited she was about your graphic novel and I asked if I could have the pleasure of editing it." The corners of her mouth curled up in spirals. "She agreed. I'm so excited."

"Terrific," I deadpanned.

"I just want to let you know that I am on *your* team."

"Couldn't be happier."

She gave me a forced hug, crushing my bones, followed by an audible crack. She pushed me away and said, "You're looking a bit thin. Maybe you should eat something," and handed me a granola bar.

"Thanks," I said.

"No, thank *you*."

When she finally left I went to the washroom and locked myself in a stall for a half an hour.



F-D-B ♫ , sung the subway's sweet arpeggio as the doors opened and bodies bouldered into the metal chamber. I was trying to focus on the illusion of the opposite train car passing while mine felt still, when a stranger grabbed onto the same pole as me. His pinky finger slid down and grazed my thumb. A part of me wanted to recoil but I kept my hand steady, letting the pulse of his finger flow through me. He avoided eye contact and read the imposing advertisements. I tried to get a glimpse of his face, looking for pieces of you: the beauty mark on your right cheek, the curve of your ear lobe.

Upon each arrival, I searched for you. I hoped that I would run into you, that my body would fling towards you as I reached for the handle and missed and fell and I would keep falling. But I never saw you. I exited the doors, climbed the stairs, pace hastened by the unison of moving crowds. As we reached the daylight, the bodies dissipated just as the star shaped leaves left their trees for the damp concrete. Whenever I saw a cyclist, I hoped it'd be you. I wanted to cross the street, illegally, j-shaped. Hit me. Your tire digging into my side. Run me over.

A car horn blared, startling me out of my daze from the centre of the road and back to the edge of the curb. A concerned older lady, with crow's feet darting out from her eyes, bent over me.

"Are you okay, miss?"

I let out a deep warm breath. It formed into an icy cloud and puffed up into the air. Reaching out for balance, I stood up and shook my head, "I'm fine." I stumbled away, peering over my shoulder to see the lady speaking to an officer. My stride quickened, and I disappeared. Is that how you did it?



The TV died yesterday. It played during every hour of the day, through the night and even when I was away. I soaked in the soft white noise like crinkling tissue paper. Now and then I'd catch conversations and let them extinguish like the pixels on the screen. When insomnia clawed, willing my eyes open, I would sit in front of the small technicolour box and turn up the volume loud enough to tune out that white figure coming in from the window.

But sometimes I didn't catch it in time and he'd slide inside, his white face expressionless except for those diamond-shaped black eyes. A bouquet of yellow roses in his hand. No words on his lips. They had been sewn shut with black thread. A rope shot out of the bouquet and up to the top of my ceiling, which had risen an extra ten feet. The rope latched itself onto the wooden beams. He tugged it, making sure it wouldn't fall, and then climbed, wrapping himself in the tightly woven fibres. Under and over his feet went. Canned crowd cheers came from somewhere, but nothing else was in my room, just the flickering blue light from the TV. Then he ripped the stitches out of his lips, black ooze dripping to the floor, "Don't worry, *mon amour*, I'll be back soon."

He let go of the rope and spun downwards, the rope unravelling from his coiled body. There was a sharp sound when he hit the ground, face first, his body in an unnatural angle, arm bent backwards, neck soft, diamond eyes open. It seemed as though the night sky had liquified and had puddled around his body, consuming the bed posts and soaking into my sheets. A scream gurgled up my throat, but now my lips were sewn shut. The clown lay on the ground, only the figure of his body apparent under the blanket of tar. I could no longer hear the TV. And that's how I knew it was broken.



Last February, Marguerite Abouet had invited a few cartoonists from Toronto to a circus performance at headquarters in Montreal. Back then, I was releasing a monthly comic and I wasn't hiding from Vivienne. Never behind on a deadline, I worked hard, figuring that if I spent all my days at Drawn & Quarterly I'd eventually earn enough to buy fruit in the winter.

I took the train into the city, admiring the snowy farms and frozen lakes – had it only been a year ago? I'd ask you if you were here. I remember the budding blooms of spring, and the haystacks of fall. It was timeless, a singular moment that would go on forever. But everything has an end, I guess.

I didn't have as much time as I would have liked to tour around the city. I went to the port at Vieux Montréal and tripped over the cobblestone streets. Then I went to the hotel. Struggled to decide whether to wear a black dress or a patterned jumpsuit. The jumpsuit won. I figured it would be more comfortable.

The theatre was in the Quartier des Spectacles and I was planning to meet Becca there. Writing and drawing are lonely professions, I have realized. It's important to make friends.

The box office attendant told me that there would be no re-entry, so I went around the corner to get a smoke. And that's where I met you.

Your costume was laughable, dressed in all white like a harlequin clown. I was giggling to myself and you pretended to laugh without any sound. I think you were trying to make fun of my jumpsuit, maybe saying that it was loud.

Then you mimed for a light, your cigarette hanging from your painted white lips. I obliged silently, moving closer. The sticks touched, burning. Inhale. Exhale.

“Girls like you make it hard to quit.” You spoke in a strong French accent. Not Quebecois.

“I thought you couldn’t speak.”

You gave a smug smile, “*Zut*, what am I to do? My career is ruined.”

Another performer opened the stage door, “Valentin, let’s go!”

You gave me a quick bow and said something in French. I didn’t understand. You thought for a moment, searching for a translation. “I’ll see you when you’re seeing me.”

I never did meet Becca that night. My phone was on silent and the texts she sent were left unread forever.

After the show, I almost didn’t recognize you. Your skin was no longer paper white but a lively olive tone. Your black hair was a mess and cascaded along your shiny face, brushing your shoulders. Your arms were open wide.

“You loved it, no?”

And for some strange reason, it felt as though I had seen hundreds of your performances and this was the thousandth time you had kissed me on both of my cheeks and hugged me into your large warm body.

Maybe that’s why I was so comfortable with everything. With you leading me back to my hotel, kissing me in the elevator. When you lay on the plush king bed and I found traces of white face paint on your neck. Fear had left me. It was like an old memory. I could vaguely remember what it should have felt like, but I couldn’t connect it to the now.

That entire night I was trying hard to believe that we were not just children of the short spark. That we weren’t just the neon lights that violated the downtown streets. We didn’t just flash in the night with infinite promises to shine forever, to glow and appear as though we’re one at the same time. Particles pulsing through thin tubes. Electricity in on the left, out on the right, seeming to glow perpetually. No, I never had the intention of becoming a neon sign because I didn’t want it to be forever, to expand that moment infinitum would be to never have a future. All I wanted was a future. Where was yours?



It was January. Five months since you had left the country for the circus tour which ended four months ago in September. It was five months since you had made me eggs for breakfast, since you ground the coffee beans, since you seemed to love me.

The last day we were together, you stood out on the Juliet balcony, watching the cars drive by. Your body hunched over the wrought iron railing in a way that made you look like a Grecian statue. I lay on the bed, reading a copy of Seth's new novel, trying hard not to hum along to an American pop song coming from the street, afraid of breaking the beautiful scene we had created. Like the first time we had met, we relied on uninterrupted stillness. The sound of our breathing, our heartbeats. I don't even remember if you had said goodbye. I didn't think much of it at the time. Maybe it was easier that way.

I had moved back to Toronto at the end of October, when I could no longer stand living in your apartment, paying your rent, in a city where I could barely speak the language. In Montreal, I had gotten by the language gap by evading reality completely. Strung by your side, dependant, looking at you for so much more than what a normal lover—a normal partner requires. Every second I spent with you eroded a piece of me. After you had left I had never been so alone in my life. Ordering a coffee felt like learning to walk again, never mind facing my art. When I looked in the mirror, I didn't see an artist. How could I ever draw again?

Toronto didn't change. It will always be the same grey January. Unheated subway stations. Icy sidewalks. Bloody chapped lips. Returning to the city felt as though I was admitting that you were a dream. That maybe you had never existed, but I had taken a long journey in Quebec only to return poorer and with less dignity. It was the embarrassing ride home on the TTC at 6am in a black party dress. It was staying in the guest room of your

parent's house after assuring them you could afford living on your own. I was back where I started. A little more broken-hearted. A little more lost than before.

I had finally given up and I called Etienne, the director of your company.

"Moranna, it's been so long. I tried to call you."

"I know. I've been... busy."

Etienne sighed as though he knew I hadn't drawn in five months. "Julie and I would love to have you over sometime."

"I moved back to Toronto. I'm not going back to Montreal."

"What? You must. We want to see you."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, I wanted to tell you in person, but I guess...the private investigator found him."

And all the fear that had left my body when I had first met you returned in that moment. I saw a body bag washed up on shore. Or curled up in a dumpster. Or diced in a field. I was making myself sick.

"Where is Valentin, right now?"

"He's in France. The PI found a new Facebook account he made." A heavy sigh, "He's made a new name for himself. He wants to be gone."

"What's his name?"

"*Blonde*, I don't think it's a good idea—"

"What's his goddamn de *câlice* name?"

"Jaques Devieux."

I hung up the phone and typed madly into the blue search bar.

And there you were.

You were always there. Always right on the outside of things. I felt violent anger and it took all my strength not to throw the TV out the window.

I wondered what would happen if I ran to the drug store, nearly knocking over a pyramid of diapers in a clumsy fit. A young boy would be at the cash giving me a questioning look as a bottle of Coke and a pregnancy test slide down the conveyor belt.

When I get back to my place, I would open the package, fill a bowl with Coke and then drop the pregnancy test inside it. I scream and blast music and hope to god that someone would call the cops on me.

Taking the dumb pink stick out of the brown box, I would lay it on the counter. The camera flashes and soon the photograph is uploaded.

The positive pregnancy test would cover your Facebook wall. Underneath it reads, “Hope you’re happy in France. ‘Cause we’ll be happier without you.”

But it was already too late for revenge. I knew I would never get the last word, never be able yell at you and tell you how much you ruined me. My job. My art. My friendships. All I wanted was an apology for the way you treated me. You couldn’t even give me that?

Staring at your new Facebook profile picture of the Luxembourg Gardens, I realized that I would never forgive you but a piece of me knew that I allowed the loss of you to possess me for months onwards. I wasn’t going to post a fake pregnancy photo on your wall because that would mean I still thought about you, that I still cared. And I was never going to give you that.



The brush rested on the calloused pad of skin between my index finger and thumb. Imposter syndrome wanted to take me but once that brush absorbed the midnight black ink, I realized what I had been missing. Thick messy strokes soon covered the page as I practiced

forms, and in what felt like an almost embarrassing moment, where I had to contemplate before the bristles splayed, I decided to make a list.

Things I don't deserve:

- you
- the memory of a hidden smile behind your tousled hair
- echoes of your deep, warm laughter
- painting watercolour drawings on your skin
- how you left me

Because no one deserves that.

Small Houses | Daniel Powell

They seem to be all the rage now, or soon will be, these tiny houses made for tiny living and, therefore, tiny dying. Yes, if I lived in one of these tiny houses I would meet my end by tiny suicide. I would take my tiny curtains and wrap them around my neck, or maybe I would take my tiny knife and drag it across my wrist as I sit in my tiny bathtub. No, that can't be. A bathtub is too big. I would be sitting in my tiny *shower*, where I'd be hugging my tiny toilet, legs curled, knees against chest, fetal.

(Which is quite apt if you really stop to think about it. Stop and smell the roses or, in this case, the body).

See, a tiny house isn't very different from a womb, at least in one very clear and special way. "Quaint" and "Cozy" are just real estate code for "Small"—both appeared in the listing for the house I finally bought—and as I stretch my limbs and bump the uterine walls of my tiny home I feel neither, and I want my money back.

Or maybe I tow it to a nearby lake and send it drowning. Down, down, down, a home for the fish. What a mansion it would be! My tiny goldfish in its tiny fishbowl on my tiny counter, circling in and out of its tiny porcelain castle, would love this newfound freedom. I sprinkle tiny flakes of food from heaven above and he or she forgets about it, inhaling them one at a time, disappearing into his or her tiny O-shaped mouth.

I bring only tall women back to the crib, not because they're my type but because I want to see if it's at all possible to make this tiny house feel even tinier. The answer = yes, my friends, it is. And when, after a big breakfast at my tiny **kitchen** table that can vanish into the wall, the woman opens the **front** only door it's like the climax of a jack-in-the-box.

And that's another thing. The door. One way in and one out. To me that is nothing but a fire hazard, and what a terrible way to go. Cause of death? He couldn't get out of his tiny house fast enough.

The viral video of tomorrow is a claustrophobic invited to a tiny house party.

I am not a doll.

And form follows function.

And I wonder if tiny houses will affect the evolutionary timeline, our children's children's children's children's children's children becoming shorter in stature until tiny houses are no longer tiny but normal.

One can only hope. Or dream.

Now please show me the person whose Dream Home is a tiny house. 300 sq. ft. of residential bliss. Not including the front porch, a front porch that does not wrap around, by the way. I have two rocking chairs there that cannot rock, at least not with someone in them and not unless you want banged-up knees.

My tiny driveway, if I may call it that, leads to a tiny flower bed with tiny flowers, and when I moved I had to ditch my old boat of a car and purchase the only car that would fit, one of those micro machines that could use my tiny house as a garage.

I buy only tiny food for my tiny fridge, and I eat it on tiny plates that I wash with a toothbrush. I've lost 21 pounds since moving.

Ironically, the Tiny House Open House had been held at my local library. Ironic because I can fit all of three books in my tiny house. Granted, they are three very thick books, but you get the point. The rest of my home library is in 87 cardboard boxes at the public storage place on the other side of town, Unit 25B. Unit 25B is bigger than my house. Good thing the monthly payment is not.

Now, it's not all bad, I should admit. I save a lot of money living here in this tiny house. I cool the place with ice cubes and warm it with candles, usually birthday ones to make myself feel better, and housekeeping costs almost nothing. Ingrid is tall and cleithrophobic, but we keep the door open and it takes so little time to clean the house that she's in and out before the hyperventilation really kicks in.

My neighbors keep their doors open a lot. Unlocked, too. Yup, it's *that* kind of neighborhood. I try to be friendly, but someone's always asking me for an egg (probably because we can only fit half-dozen cartons) or something else they've run out of too quickly. We have a neighborhood grocery store, if I may call it that, but it's tiny and runs out of food too quickly, too. And there's no sense in driving to the big chain store because, well, our tiny cars can only hold so many bags.

I've trimmed everything down to the bare essentials. One pair of shoes, which I mostly leave outside by my tiny doormat on which I can wipe only one sole at a time. I'd love it if the mat read Home Sweet Home, but it's too tiny for all that. Three shirts and three

pants, which I keep in a tiny drawer beneath the bed, which, by the way, does not vanish into the wall. In the other drawer, three pairs of boxers and three pairs of socks, a belt, and one neck tie (there is no closet in which to hang it).

If I ever bought a dog for my humble abode, it would be a Chihuahua, one of the so-called teacup variety. Even better would be one with three legs. S/He would eat from a tiny bowl, drink from a tiny bowl, and have a tiny collar and a tiny leash that match, but I would not dress the dog in tiny clothes. S/He would chew on a tiny chew toy and bark a tiny bark when someone knocked on the door, which would come to have a tiny doggy door installed for easy access to the tiny yard where s/he'd poop tiny turds. I'd have a tiny lawnmower, one of those (hu)manpowered ones so as to not invite the wrath of my neighbors—not for the sound but for the use of gasoline.

I erected a tiny white picket fence around my tiny yard, just in case I ever do get that dog, and slung a tiny hammock between two tiny trees. Only the dog will probably ever get to use it, though I have a tiny suspicion s/he'll hate it. Tiny yaps will follow, followed by a quick escape. Tiny legs blurring toward the tiny door, through the tiny door and onto the tiny doggy bed of tiny plaid, where s/he'll take a tiny nap.

I, too, take only tiny naps, thanks to my tiny bed, whose three walls close in on me and there's no room to point my feet. I sleep on my back, unless a woman is here, and I stare at my tiny ceiling or out my tiny window, hoping for a sliver of the moon to float into the black square that is only just a line from this angle.

Needless to say, I spend little time in my tiny house. And maybe that's the real point of these things anyway. Maybe they're just boxes for sleeping and that's about it. Get up and out. Out into the world.

Fresh air.

Sunshine.

Stop and smell the roses.

Walk.

Because there's no room to exercise inside, that's for sure. And your friends don't want to hang out there. And even your tiny house neighbors don't want to hang out with you in your tiny house or have you hang out with them in theirs.

Get out.

See the world.

Wander.

And I wonder if tiny houses are a thing in places like Kansas and Tornado Alley.
Doubt it. No way. Right?

Another terrible way to go.

“Nice place,” she says.

“Thanks.”

“Did you decorate it yourself?”

“No.” I saved on that, too.

“What’s it like living here?”

“Why don’t you move in and find out?”

Two steps later she’s out the door.

And I wonder if there are any tiny houses in Texas.

Nope. Never.

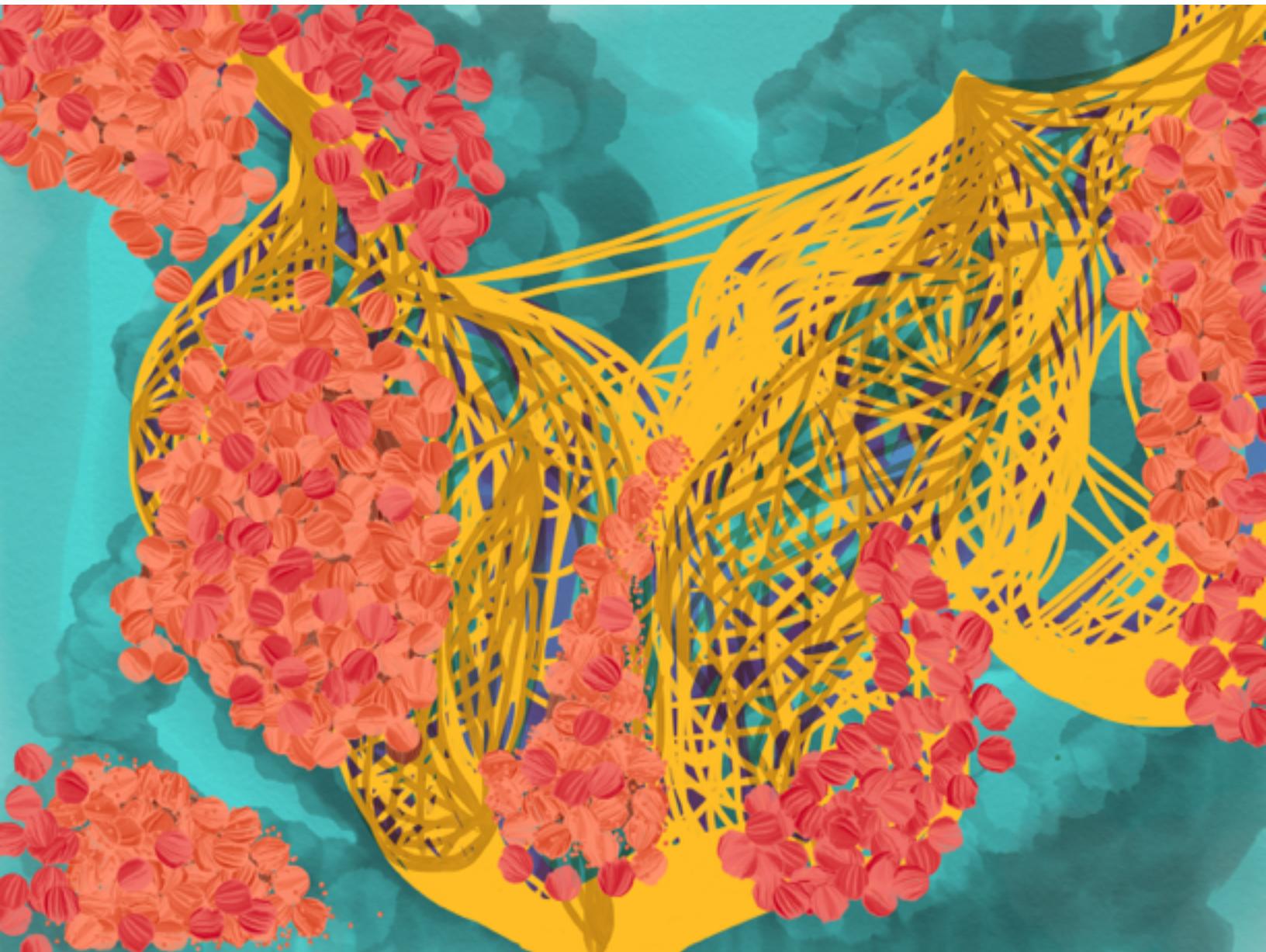
I have tiny art on my tiny walls, tiny plants in tiny terracotta pots, a tiny computer on a tiny desk that vanishes like the table. If only the house itself could vanish into the earth or the forest or the sea. A casket, a tree house, a submarine.

I couldn’t find a tiny TV, so I don’t have one of any kind, though a 42-inch would make the place feel like a movie palace.

I like movies. I like movies on the big screen.

I think I’ll take a walk to the multiplex.

The curtains can wait.



graphique: Nest | Emilie Kefalas



graphique: 004 | Elina Ghanbari

artist bios

Joshua Adair

Joshua G. Adair is an associate professor of English at Murray State University, where he also serve as coordinator of Gender & Diversity studies. His creative and scholarly work has appeared in over fifty journals. His collection, *Defining Memory*, edited with Amy K. Levin, appeared from *Rowman & Littlefield* in 2017.

David M. Alper

David M. Alper is a high school AP English teacher in New York City, residing in Manhattan. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Northridge Review*, *The Platform Review*, *Shantih Journal*, *Dragon Poet Review*, and *Tilde*.

Guilherme Bergamini

Guilherme Bergamini is 39 years old and was born in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. He graduated in journalism and has been working with photography for 22 years. Through this art, Bergamini intends to express his experiences, worldview and anxieties. A photography enthusiast since childhood, he is passionate about the new contemporary possibilities that this technique allows and photography as a way to convey political and social criticism. Awarded in national and international competitions and festivals, he took part in group and solo exhibitions in Brazil, Portugal, Spain, Greece, France, Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Lithuania, Turkey, Venezuela, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Ecuador, Colombia, Uruguay, United States and India. His work has been published in several Brazilian and foreign press vehicles. He publishes part of his photographic journey on his website www.guilhermebergamini.com

Shanita Bigelow

Shanita Bigelow is a poet from North Carolina currently living in Chicago. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Bombay Gin*, *New American Writing*, *Callaloo*, *African American Review*, and *Anomaly* among others. Her chapbook, *Wherever Clarity is Necessary*, is available through dancing girl press.

Dave Brennan

Dave Brennan's books include *If Beauty Has to Hide* (Spuyten Duyvil), a collection of cross-genre work, and *Murder Ballads: Exhuming the Body Buried Beneath Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (Punctum Books), a work of creative literary criticism. Poems and essays have appeared and are forthcoming in *BOAAT*, *Timber*, *Always Crashing*, *Heavy Feather Review* and elsewhere. He teaches at James Madison University in Virginia.

Roberto Carcache Flores

Roberto Carcache Flores is a writer from El Salvador. He is the author of *Viszlat*, a collection of short fiction published by Dink Press. Links to his poetry and stories can be found here: <https://rcarcachefloresblog.wordpress.com>

Alexander Chernavskiy

Born in 1981, basically based in Moscow, Russia, Alexander Chernavskiy is a Russian artist. His career emerged in the wake of the influence of documentary traditions and contemporary art as the fields of his main interest. He is a magister of sociology (MPSU university). In 2010 he finished his secondary education in MSU (photojournalism). He was a participant of different festivals and exhibitions in Russia, Georgia, Belarus, Latvia, Ukraine, USA, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Belgium, Slovenia through recent years. His works were published by *Privateonline*, *Sonder review*, *Snapdragon*, *Stoneboat*, *Raven Chronicles*, *Dodho*, and *The Ocotillo Review* in 2017.

Morgan Christie

Morgan Christie's work has appeared in *Hippocampus*, *Aethlon*, *Blackberry*, *Germ Magazine*, *Moko*, as well as others, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her chapbook *Variations on a Lobster's Tale* was the winner of the 2017 Alexander Posey Chapbook Prize and is forthcoming from New Plains Review Press (2018). Her second collection *Sterling* is due out next year. She recently completed her Masters in Creative Writing.

Ruben Cota, Jr.

Ruben Cota, Jr., is a writer from Salinas, CA, currently attending the University of California, Irvine. He writes poetry and prose. He wishes he could draw.

William Cullen Jr.

William Cullen Jr. is a veteran and works at a social services non-profit in Brooklyn, New York. His work has appeared in *Canary*, *Concis*, *Gravel*, *Gulf Stream*, *Pouch*, *Spillway*, *Switchback*, *The American Journal of Poetry* and *Written River: A Journal of Eco-Poetics*.

Dawn Cunningham

Dawn Cunningham practices experimental fiction to get a full flavor of emotions, when it is called upon to define a piece of work. She earned a BGS and MA through Indiana U Purdue U Fort Wayne, which has provided her the opportunity to open up her mind to multiple techniques practiced by various authors. Her writing comes out of the joy of oral storytelling (which she didn't do as well as with pen and paper) taught to her by her Gran'ma Ginny through the Native American tradition.

Jeni De La O

Jeni De La O is an Afro-Cuban poet and storyteller living in Detroit. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Obsidian*, *York Literary Review*, *Really System*, *Gigantic Sequins*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, *Rigorous Magazine* and others. Jeni founded Relato:Detroit, the nation's first bilingual community storytelling event, which seeks to bridge linguistics divides through story. She is a Poetry Editor for *Rockvale Review* and organizes Poems in the Park, an acoustic reading series based in Detroit.

Alicia Drier

Alicia Drier recently moved to Indianapolis, where she is a high school English teacher and pie shop aficionado. She has previously self-published two novels through *Lulu.com*, been published by IPFW's literary magazine *Confluence*, and worked as a writer at *Study Breaks Magazine*.

Aaron Emmel

Aaron Emmel's stories have appeared in *Hypertext Magazine*, *Riding Light Review*, *Chicago Literati*, and other publications. Find him online at www.aaronemmel.com

Dom Fonce

Dom Fonce is a poet from Youngstown, Ohio. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the new literary magazine *Volney Road Review*. His poetry has been published in, or is forthcoming in, the *Tishman Review*, *Obra/Artifact*, *Burning House Press*, *Black Rabbit Quarterly*, *Italian Americana*, *3Elements Literary Review*, *Junto Magazine*, *Ohio's Best Emerging Poets: An Anthology*, and elsewhere. His Instagram is @domfoncepoe

Allen Forrest

Allen Forrest is a writer, graphic artist, and filmmaker, the winner of the 2015 Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University's *Reed Magazine*, and he lives in Vancouver, BC, Canada. His Bel Red landscape paintings are part of the Bellevue College Foundation's permanent art collection in Bellevue, WA. To find more of his published works, please visit him online at <http://art-grafiken.blogspot.ca/2016/04/poetry-and-prose.html> to browse his poetry and prose collection; and <http://art-grafiken.blogspot.ca/2016/12/graphic-narrative.html> to browse his graphic narrative collection.

Elina Ghanbari

Elina Ghanbari was born on November 22th, 1989, and lives in Iran. A self-employed artist, she graduated from university with a bachelor's degree in accounting. After graduation, she continued life as an artist. Her artworks appear in the *ojalart.com*. Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/_elinart_/

Rich Glinnen

Rich Glinnen is a market researcher by day and a writer by night. He enjoys bowling, and drinking red wine with his cats at his home in Bayside, NY. He's currently nominated for the 2017 Best of the Net Anthology. His poesy can be read in *Kenneth Warren's Lakewood House Organ*, at foliateoak.com, petrichormag.com, and richglinnen.tumblr.com. His wife calls him Taco.

Robin Gow

Robin Gow's poetry has recently been published in *Glass Mountain*, *Furrow*, *carte blanche*, *FIVE:2:ONE*, and *Corbel Stone Press*. He is a graduate student at Adelphi University pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing. He is an out and proud bisexual transgender man passionate about LGBT issues.

Deb Jannerson

Deb Jannerson is the author of the poetry collections *Rabbit Rabbit* (Finishing Line Press, 2016) and *Thanks for Nothing* (Finishing Line Press, 2018), which have been acclaimed by *Autostraddle* and notable poets Franny Choi and Carolyn Hembree. Her debut YA novel is forthcoming from NineStar Press in 2019. She won the 2017 So to Speak Nonfiction Contest for an essay about queer intimacy and PTSD, the 2018 Flexible Persona Editors' Prize for a work of flash fiction about gruesome at-work injuries, and a Two Sisters Publishing prize for a story about switching bodies with her cat. More than one hundred of her pieces have been featured in anthologies and magazines, including viral articles for *Bitch*. She lives in New Orleans with her wife and pets.

Couri Johnson

Couri Johnson is a graduate of the North Eastern Ohio Master of Fine Arts currently living in Japan. She is working on a collection of speculative and fabulist fiction. Find more of her work on twitter @a_couri

Emilie Kefalas

Emilie Kefalas is an experienced writer and journalist based in Burbank, California. Originally from Decatur, Illinois, she has contributed to various publications including *South Magazine*, *Savannah Scene & Savannah.com*, *Connect Savannah*, *DoSavannah*, and *THOM Magazine*. Emilie currently works as a member of the external communications team at Disney Parks, Experiences, and Consumer Products.

Mary Leoson

Leoson teaches composition and psychology courses at the college level in Cleveland, Ohio. She loves to write with her dogs at her feet and somehow survives on decaf coffee and protein bars. She holds an M.A. in English & Writing from Western New Mexico University and an M.S. in Psychology from Walden University. Her writing has been featured in the *Twisted Vine Literary Journal*, *TWJ Magazine*, *The Write Launch*, *GNU Journal*, *The Gyara Journal*, and on NPR's *This I Believe* series. You can learn more at www.maryleoson.com

Natasha Levinski

Natasha Levinski is a page and screen writer based in Toronto.

Allie Marini

Allie Marini is a cross-genre writer holding degrees from both Antioch University of Los Angeles & New College of Florida. Author of *Pictures from the Center of The Universe* (Paper Nautilus, winner of the Vella Prize) and *Southern Cryptozoology: A Field Guide to Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Hyacinth Girl Press, finalist for the SFPA's Elgin Award), she's a native Floridian now freezing to death in the Bay Area writing poetry, fiction, and essays--find her online: www.alliemarini.com

Sara Matson

Sara Matson's writing can be found or is forthcoming in *The Journal Petra*, *Dying Dahlia Review*, *Meow Meow Pow Pow*, *Rabid Oak*, *Mannequin Haus*, *Awkward Mermaid*, *Soft Cartel*, *Dream Pop Press*, and elsewhere. Sara lives in Chicago with her rad husband + cats, and tweets as @skeletorwrites

Teresa Morse

Teresa Morse holds a BA in English from Baker University. A Kansas native turned ex-Georgian, she now lives in the Cedar Valley with her husband and pug. When not reading or writing, she can be found hiking, baking bread, or rummaging in antique stores. Her work has appeared in *The Cape Rock* and *Fearsome Critters*.

Kelly Nelson

Kellyn Elson is a poet and anthropologist who teaches Interdisciplinary Studies at Arizona State University. Her poetry has appeared in *Seattle Review*, *Anomaly*, *Forklift, Ohio*, *Best American Experimental Writing* and elsewhere. Her visual work has appeared in *Otoliths*, *Angry Old Man* and *The New Post-literate*. She hasn't owned a car in 19 years and teaches found poetry classes at her local library.

Thomas Osatchoff

Thomas Osatchoff is doing fieldwork for his debut volume of poetry. He has resided in many places throughout the world where he has had opportunities to develop his perspective. Thomas has appeared recently both online and in print and is forthcoming.

Bella Pori

Bella Pori is a law student and poet in Brooklyn, New York. Her poetry can be found in *HCE Review*, *Alternating Current*, and *FEELINGS*, among others. Her political writing can be found on westwingbestwing.com

Daniel Powell

Danny Powell has been awarded writing fellowships and residencies from Hawthornden Castle, the Edward F. Albee Foundation, Tofte Lake Center, and Art & History Museums—Maitland. His work has appeared in *Blunderbuss Magazine*, *Atlas & Alice*, *Fantastic Floridas*, *York Literary Review*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Pea River Journal*, and elsewhere. More at danny-powell.com

John Timothy Robinson

John Timothy Robinson is a mainstream citizen and holds a Regent's Degree. He minored in Studio Art: Printmaking in college. John is also a eleven-year educator in Mason County, WV. He is a published poet with ninety-seven literary works appearing in seventy-four journals and websites since August 2016 in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. In Printmaking, his primary medium is Monotype and Monoprint process with interest in collagraph, lithography, etching and nature prints. John also has an interest in photography and collage art.

Jim Zola

Jim Zola is a poet and photographer living in North Carolina.



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Alumni Editors | Rebecca Renner, Jared Alan Smith, Lucianna Chixaro Ramos, Jacklyn Gion, Shelby Smotherman

Faculty + Visiting Artists | Terri Witek, Cyriaco Lopes, Teresa Carmody, Urayoán Noel, Laura Mullen, Veronica Gonzalez Peña, Carlos Soto Román, Lenora de Barros, Ana Paula Maia, Alexandra Joy Forman, Octavio di Leo, Tchello d'Barros

thank you